

**Exploring Participants' Experiences in an Arts-Based Bereavement Support Group for
Traumatic and/or Unexpected Losses**

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Abstract

Our understanding of grief has shifted in recent years, resulting in a call for international research in the areas of grief and bereavement, and in identifying effective supports and interventions for those who are mourning. Individuals who lose a loved one to traumatic and/or unexpected causes (unnatural events such as overdoses, suicides, car accidents, violent crimes) often face some specific challenges in their grieving journey, are at higher risk for experiencing complicated grief.. Some recent research has identified the usefulness of arts-based interventions in supporting those who are bereaved. Bereaved individuals participating in arts-based methods may receive support through art-making and engaging in the creative process itself, as well as through meaning-making opportunities in metaphoric communication related to loss, and through memorialisation of one's relationship with the deceased. The study described herein utilizes a qualitative research process and thematic analysis to explore the experiences of participants in Northern Ontario in an arts-based bereavement support group for traumatic and/or unexpected losses. Four main themes emerged from the data (1) exploring new territory (2) travelling together (3) crossing the borders, and (4) getting somewhere. Collectively, the participants herein described their experience in the group as being helpful in their personal grief journeys, in their understanding of themselves, and/or in making meanings in relation to their loss(s). Several participants in the study expressed signs of growth, making statements specifically attributing this growth to their participation in the group. The findings in this study provide a rich and in-depth exploration of five individuals' experiences in an arts-based supportive group for traumatic losses, adding to a limited body of literature on the topic. Areas in need of further research are discussed as well as implications for social work.

Notre compréhension du chagrin a changé depuis les dernières années, menant à une demande pour une recherche internationale axée sur le chagrin et le deuil, et menant à identifier des supports et des interventions efficaces pour ceux qui vivent un deuil. Les individus qui perdent un ou une proche de façon inattendu ou traumatique (une surdose, le suicide, un accident, la violence) vont souvent vivre un chagrin plus complexe engendrant plus de défis. Certaines études ont démontré l'utilité d'interventions axées sur les arts visuels pour la personne en deuil. Ces activités en arts visuels promouvant la créativité tout en donnant à la personne une occasion de se rappeler de son être cher. L'étude suivante, à l'aide d'une méthode qualitative et analytique, explore les expériences de participants et participantes du nord de l'Ontario, suivant des sessions d'arts visuels, centrées sur le deuil subit. Quatre thèmes principaux en sortent : (1) Explorer de nouveaux territoires (2) Voyager ensemble (3) Traverser des frontières (4) Y arriver. Ensemble, les participants/participantes ont décrit ce processus comme utile dans l'atteinte d'une compréhension du deuil à vivre, de leur cheminement dans le deuil, ainsi que d'eux-mêmes. Plusieurs participants ont exprimé la gratitude basée sur la participation au groupe. Les résultats de cette étude fournissent une exploration en profondeur de cinq individus avec des expériences en un programme basé en arts visuels qui vivent un chagrin plus complexe engendrant plus de défis, ajoutant à un nombre limité d'études sur le sujet du deuil. Des domaines qui ont besoin de plus d'étude sont discutés aussi comme les implications pour le travail social.

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Grief from bereavement is an emotional response to losing a loved one that almost everyone will encounter at least once during their lifetime (Beaumont, 2013). Previously, grief and bereavement theorists had come to some consensus around the nature of grief as being a fairly universal experience (Beaumont 2013; Thompson & Neimeyer, 2014). Despite the commonality of grief to human experience, recent shifts in our understanding of bereavement and loss have shown that in fact each of us responds to grief quite uniquely (Beaumont, 2013; Rabin & Dexter, 2013). Grief responses vary and can range from a resilient response experiencing little psychological distress (Bonanno, 2004), to a more severe, debilitating, and sometimes life-threatening response occurring over an extended period of time. This is known as complicated grief (Boelen & van den Bout, 2008; Bonanno 2006).

Since the recent shifts in understanding of the grief response, theory and research regarding bereavement in general has flourished internationally (Beaumont, 2013; Bonanno 2004). Grief theorists and interventionists now recognize the importance of considering individuality in the grief experience, and have been exploring new ways to understand grief, loss, and bereavement through a myriad of research efforts (Bonanno 2004; de Groot & Kollen, 2013; Holland & Neimeyer, 2010; Neimeyer, 2014; Rabin & Dexter, 2013). In this search for further understanding of grief experiences, other related phenomenon such as meaning-making processes in response to loss, posttraumatic growth after bereavement, as well as models and methods of intervention that promote positive outcomes for those bereaved, have also become increasingly important to explore.

My personal interests in exploring grief work were first ignited during a field placement at a local hospice, while obtaining my Bachelor of Social Work degree at Laurentian University. My student role at the hospice was to co-facilitate expressive arts activities during the day for

residents and their family members. I enjoyed this experience immensely and focused many of my research papers during my undergraduate studies on the use of arts-based interventions. I also utilized various expressive arts activities in my own personal life, as means of expression, coping, and discovery. After graduating with my B.S.W., I did not work in the field of grief and bereavement, but I continued to use art-making as a personal coping/care tool. After practicing in various areas of social work, I learned that I most enjoyed clinical/counselling work with individuals and families. I became hungry for advanced social work knowledge in this area, and therefore, embarked on a journey to obtain an M.S.W. degree from Laurentian University.

From the onset of my participation in graduate level study, I was particularly interested in exploring the usefulness of expressive arts-based intervention in bereavement work. During preparation for my graduate research project, however, I lost a very close friend to suicide. Although I struggled with this grief experience, the experience also simultaneously provoked my interest in narrowing my research focus to exploring supports for those who have lost a loved one to traumatic and/or unexpected causes. The terms ‘unexpected’ and/or ‘traumatic’ loss refers to those impacted by the loss of a loved one to unnatural causes. I became curious; what are we learning about this type of loss? Are there any specific challenges to this type of bereavement? If so, what kinds of supports might be helpful?

My experiences with art-making and grief, the questions posed above, as well as the recent literature on the topic presented in the following section, were all contributors in forming the impetus for my exploration and the subsequent graduate research project described herein. In the next chapter I explore literature on the topics of grief models, terminology, and conceptualizations, as well as varying interventions for grief showing promise in the contemporary literature. This is followed by a methodology chapter in which I explain the

research design, procedure, data collection, and the data analysis used in this study. Finally, I discuss the qualitative results of my project. The themes of Exploring New Territory, Travelling Together, Crossing the Borders, and Getting Somewhere, are discussed in detail in the findings chapter. Implications for social work are discussed in the conclusion, including an argument for the inclusion of arts-based methods in social work research and intervention.

Literature Review

Bereavement is a term generally used when referring to the loss of someone to death. Grief from bereavement is an emotional response to losing a loved one. Grief from bereavement is an experience that most everyone will encounter at least once during their lifetime, and often multiple times (Beaumont, 2013). Previously, grief and bereavement theorists had come to some general consensus about grief as being a fairly universal experience (Beaumont, 2013; Rabin & Dexter, 2013; Thompson & Neimeyer, 2014), involving stages and grief ‘work’ (Beaumont, 2013; Holland & Neimeyer, 2010; Rabin & Dexter, 2013). Although many individuals when faced with loss do experience a range of emotions alike the stage theory, more recent research challenges generality and universality in explaining grief responses (Holland & Neimeyer, 2010; Neimeyer 2014), and instead offer a more heterogenic model of bereavement. For example, recent research efforts indicate that rather than a generalized experience, individual grief responses are impacted by numerous factors including an individual’s dispositional tendencies, coping responses, and the circumstances of the death, such as a violent death or long-term illness and/or one’s relationship to the deceased (Beaumont, 2013; Neimeyer, 2014; Thompson & Neimeyer, 2014).

Since the recent shifts in our understanding of grief responses, theory and research regarding bereavement in general has flourished internationally (Beaumont, 2013; Bonanno 2004). Grief theorists and interventionists now recognize the importance of considering individuality in the grief experience, and have been exploring new ways to understand grief, loss, and bereavement through a myriad of research efforts (Bonanno 2004; de Groot & Kollen, 2013; Holland & Neimeyer, 2010; Neimeyer, 2014; Rabin & Dexter, 2013). In the search for better understanding of individual grief experiences, types of loss, and other related phenomenon such

as meaning-making processes, resiliency, posttraumatic growth after bereavement, as well as models and methods of intervention that might promote positive outcomes for those bereaved, have also become areas of increased exploration. The first major section of the literature review herein, provides an overview of some of the recent literature regarding grief theory and topics related to types of grief responses.

Grief Models, Terminology, and Conceptualizations

A Shift in Understanding: Contemporary Grief Literature.

As introduced above, previously, grief and bereavement theorists had come to some consensus about the nature of grief response, as being a fairly universal experience (Beaumont 2013; Neimeyer, 2014; Thompson & Neimeyer, 2014). The beginnings of our current understanding of grief are generally attributed to Freud's (1915) work on mourning and melancholia (Bouchal, Rallison, Moules & Sinclair, 2015). Freud described grief as the process of energy withdrawal from a person or object that is lost. Lindemann's (1944) work on grief and its symptomatology suggested grief was a crisis that follows loss which included physical symptoms that lasted around six to eight weeks before recovery (Bouchal et al., 2015). For many years, grief interventionists in turn, based their work on both the psychodynamic influence of Freudian concepts such as the need to 'work through' grief (termed by Freud as 'Trauerarbeit') and 'let go' of the deceased, as well as the idea that all individuals who become bereaved would experience a progression of stages of grieving based on the influence of the Kubler-Ross theory of bereavement (Beaumont, 2013; Holland & Neimeyer, 2010; Rabin & Dexter, 2013; Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Although many individuals when faced with loss do experience a range of emotions alike the stage theory (beginning with denial and progressing through anger, bargaining, depression, and eventually leading to acceptance), more recent research challenges

this generality and universality in explaining grief responses (Holland & Neimeyer, 2010), and instead offer a more heterogenic model of bereavement. The following section presents some of the recent literature exploring individual and personalized grief response.

Heterogeneity Bereavement Model.

Most recent research efforts indicate that rather than a generalized experience, individual grief responses are impacted by numerous factors including but not limited to, an individual's dispositional tendencies, coping responses, and the circumstances of the death/loss (i.e., violent cause of death or long-term illness, relationship to the deceased) (Beaumont 2013; Holland & Neimeyer, 2011; Neimeyer, 2014; Thompson & Neimeyer, 2014). Some recent longitudinal studies have emphasized the significant heterogeneity in bereavement responses which range from people experiencing disabling, ongoing, and severe levels of distress, some people experiencing distress that lessens over time, and others experiencing little or no disruption in functioning (eg. Bonanno, 2004; Bonanno et al., 2002; MacIejewski, Zhang, Block, & Prigerson, 2007). Taking heterogeneity bereavement theory into consideration, MacCallum, Galatzer-Levy, and Bonanno (2015) examined the course of depression following spousal and child bereavement. In a sample of 2,512 bereaved adults, four different depression courses were identified: Resilience, Chronic Grief (an onset of depression following loss), Depressed-Improved (high depression at pre-loss decreasing after loss), and Pre-Existing Chronic Depression continuing. The authors concluded that findings such as those above, better inform our understanding of a variety of grief outcomes following bereavement and highlight the importance of continued research on the vast heterogeneity of responses and potential outcomes.

The next few sections review literature regarding a continuum of varying grief responses, beginning with debilitating prolonged grief known as “complicated grief,” and then encouraging research exploring resiliency after loss as well as the potentiality of posttraumatic growth.

Complicated Grief: Prolonged Grief Disorder / Chronic Grief

Losing a loved one can evoke emotions in us that we do not understand and for some has been described as unbearable. While the literature interchanges the concepts of complicated grief, prolonged grief disorder, and chronic grief disorder, it consistently describes similar factors contributing to each concept such as the relationship with the deceased, the cause of death/loss, negative or fatalistic worldview, lack of social support, and underlying mental health issues (Bonanno et al., 2002).

Those who are unable to reconstitute after loss, who experience chronic and severe grief reactions, may be experiencing what has been more recently commonly defined as complicated grief (Rozalski, Holland & Neimeyer, 2016). Complicated grief is characterized by an intense and ongoing yearning for the deceased, an inability to trust others, rumination, hearing the voice of the deceased, ongoing impairment in daily functioning, and feeling a lack of meaning in life after the loss (Beaumont, 2013; Rozalski et al., 2016; Shear et al., 2011). Longitudinal studies on complicated grief have shown that complicated grief reactions are associated with poor mental and physical health outcomes such as an increased risk for cancer, heart problems, high blood pressure, and suicidal ideation (Boelen, van den Bout & de Keijser, 2003; de Groot & Kollen, 2013). Research suggests that between 10-20% of bereaved individuals struggle with complicated or prolonged grief (Bonanno et al., 2002).

Complicated grief is a distinct response from other post-bereavement reactions, including posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression (Golden & Dalgleish, 2010).

Although complicated grief and posttraumatic stress are related, research has shown that they are in fact distinct phenomenon (Boelen et al., 2003; Brady, Acierno, Resnick, Kilpatrick & Saunders, 2004). Following bereavement, posttraumatic stress symptoms have been recognized by researchers as potential psychological complications. Posttraumatic stress symptoms following bereavement are quite high and some literature indicates they occur in 9-27% of bereaved individuals (O'Connor, Nickerson, Aderka & Bryant, 2015). This statistic emphasizes how common posttraumatic symptoms following bereavement can be. Interestingly, the relationship between posttraumatic stress and complicated grief continues to be explored. O'Connor et al., (2015) examined the chronological relationship between changes in complicated grief symptoms and posttraumatic stress symptoms during the first four years following old age spousal loss. The findings indicated that changes in complicated grief may precede and potentially significantly impact changes in the posttraumatic stress following bereavement. The authors suggest that there may be potential value in aiming interventions at grief symptoms at an early point following old age spousal bereavement.

Shear, Jackson, Essock, Donahue and Felton (2006) found in their study of traumatic adult bereavement that a large number of bereaved adults living with complicated grief did not present with PTSD, whereas most participants with symptoms of PTSD also presented with complicated grief issues. These varied results have contributed to a debate regarding best practices when approaching treatment or intervention with some researchers prioritizing PTSD (Swan & Scott, 2009) and some prioritizing interventions focused on complicated grief (Nakajima, Masaya, Akemi & Takako, 2012; Shear et al., 2006). Similar to complicated grief, the next section explores another type of grief response, related to complications with a bereaved individual's sense of spirituality.

Complicated Spiritual Grief

When faced with grief from bereavement, individuals utilize many coping responses, often turning to their faith, religion, or spiritual beliefs and values for support. Spiritual coping has been conceptualized in a variety of ways (Burke, Neimeyer, McDevitt-Murphy, Ippolito & Roberts, 2011; Neimeyer & Burke, 2015). According to the literature, studies on spirituality and religion in bereavement show that spirituality is a large contributor to the ‘accommodation of loss’ process for many grieverers (Burke & Neimeyer, 2014; Wortman & Park, 2008) and that spirituality and religion generally provide solace and what is seen as positive support to grieverers’ journeys (Neimeyer & Burke, 2015). At times however, grief from bereavement can challenge an individual’s faith, and cause one to become angry or to disassociate from their faith altogether (Neimeyer & Burke, 2015). Exline and Rose (2005) reported that believers in God commonly blamed God for their losses, even when there was another tangible individual responsible for the loss that they were grieving (e.g., in the case of homicide loss). Exline and Rose note that this data was gathered exclusively from American samples, where Judeo-Christian beliefs continue to predominate. If ongoing, over time, these spiritual/religious challenges can result in significant spiritual or religious struggle or what has more recently been coined as ‘complicated spiritual grief’ (Wortman & Park, 2008).

Complicated spiritual grief has been identified as a spiritual crisis in the grieverers’ relationship with their God, and in the grieverers’ ability to restore spiritual balance following loss (Burke et al., 2011). Complicated spiritual grief is often accompanied by a sense of conflict, and/or distance from God, and/or with members of one’s spiritual community (Neimeyer & Burke, 2015). Burke, Neimeyer, Young, Piazza Bonin and Davis (2014), completed a qualitative study to gain a better understanding of the experiences of bereaved

individuals who have suffered a crisis of faith after the death of a loved one. Findings included overarching themes of ‘resentment and doubt towards God’, ‘dissatisfaction with the spiritual support received’, and ‘substantial changes in the mourners’ spiritual beliefs and behaviors’. The authors argued that their work provides a construct for complicated spiritual grief and lays groundwork for specific assessment and treatment of this condition (Burke et al., 2014).

In an effort to understand the relationship between religious coping and heterogenic bereavement outcomes, Burke et al. (2011) completed a longitudinal study of African American homicide survivors to establish whether religious coping more strongly predicted bereavement distress or the opposite. Results indicated a correlation between negative religious coping and all forms of bereavement distress (depression, posttraumatic stress, and anxiety) whereas no such link was found between positive religious coping and bereavement outcomes. Burke et al. (2011) also reported that only complicated grief predicted higher levels of complicated spiritual grief. The authors suggest that clinicians even those working in secular contexts should remain sensitive to the profound spiritual crises that accompany loss for some grievers.

Similarly, Burke and Neimeyer (2014) conducted research to explore posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, complicated grief, and complicated spiritual grief outcomes in a diverse sample of mourners. Several important findings were highlighted including complicated grief and complicated spiritual grief were reported in higher levels in those bereaved violently than in those bereaved by natural deaths, and that specific cause of death (natural, anticipated, natural sudden, homicide, suicide, or fatal accident) differentially predicted levels of complicated grief and complicated spiritual grief (Burke & Neimeyer, 2014). The findings of this study may provide a better understanding of spiritual coping in the wake of complicated loss and

may have implications for interventions with mourners struggling with clinical complications. In addition, Burke and Neimeyer (2014) have argued that more work is warranted in the assessment of spiritual struggle specific to the context of bereavement, as well as refinement of both grief assessment and interventions.

Not all grief responses are complicated or prolonged, and contemporary grief theorists and interventionist are increasingly interested in topics of resiliency, reconstitution, and growth after loss. The following section reviews some of the recent literature contributions regarding these areas.

Resiliency and Post Traumatic Growth

In stark contrast to complicated grief responses, research has shown that many individuals are resilient when faced with bereavement and loss (Beaumont, 2013; Bonnano 2004). Some individuals may even experience a sense of relief or perceive positive benefits of the loss in response to their bereavement, such as in the case of witnessing long-term suffering of illness by a loved one (Bonnano, 2004; Bonanno & Mancini, 2008; Bowman, 1999). Research shows that many individuals who experience highly aversive situations, actually endure minor interruptions in functioning and retain capacity for positive experience and positive affect (Bonanno, Moskowitz, Papa & Folkman, 2005). Research also supports that subsequent to an individual experiencing a traumatic event, the most common response or outcome is resilience (Bonanno et al., 2005; Eppler, 2008). For example, among bereaved parents, spouses, and caregivers of a chronically ill life partner using a range of self-report and objective measures of adjustment, Bonanno et.al. (2005) reported that resilience was evident in half of each of a bereaved sample when compared with matched non-bereaved counterparts. Quality of relationship with spouse/partner or caregiver burden did not appear to influence resiliency

amongst these participants. However, the resilient group were rated more positively and as better adjusted by close friends.

Beyond resiliency in loss, some individuals experience positive growth or establish new life meanings as a result of their loss or traumatic experience (Bonnano, 2004). In fact, a number of recent articles discussing trauma, resiliency and reconstitution, identify a framework for transformative processes in the face of trauma. That an individual can undergo positive change as a result of difficult life challenges or trauma is known by various names, the most common of which is “posttraumatic growth”, first termed by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996).

Posttraumatic growth, although not a new concept, has been receiving increasing attention in the literature related to individuals’ experiences with grief from bereavement and other traumatic events. More recent considerations of trauma experiences suggest that it is important to consider in some instances the positive aspects of the struggle with traumatic experiences (Calhoun, Tedeschi, Cann & Hanks, 2010; Ogińska-Bulik, 2014; Vanhooren, Leijssen & Dezutter, 2015). Many of those exposed to traumatic material do not experience long term traumatic stress reactions and some grow from the experience (Triplett, Tedeschi, Cann, Calhoun, & Reeve, 2012). Posttraumatic growth is described as the result of an intensive period of working through the issues that have arisen in times of adversity (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004). The definition of growth in the context of posttraumatic growth is that the post-trauma state of the individual exceeds the pre-trauma state, and this exceeding of the original state is what differentiates growth from resilience (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004; Dekel, Ein-Dor & Solomon, 2012;).

Life stress and traumatic experiences can shake our basic assumptions, previously held beliefs or meanings about oneself or the world (Park, 2010). Rozalski et al., (2016) discuss that

being able to explain and understand stressful events is a robust predictor of better psychological health, including less psychiatric stress, less workplace burnout, and fewer PTSD symptoms (Currier et al., 2013). Being able to make new meanings, form new assumptions or new beliefs about oneself or the world after stressful life events may help to foster posttraumatic growth. For example, Vanhooren et al., (2015) suggest experiencing trauma can provide opportunity for existential questioning, can lead to a deeper appreciation for life, and has the potential to lead to posttraumatic growth. This kind of growth can be understood as a significant shift in a persons' connection to oneself, in stronger relationships with others, in a deeper appreciation for life, in an increased sense of personal strength, in different priorities, and in a richer spiritual life (Vanhooren et al., 2015).

Recent theory and research have drawn attention to the need to better understand posttraumatic growth occurring in bereaved individuals even as negative emotions related to grief persist (Calhoun et al., 2010; Ogińska-Bulik, 2014). In an attempt to further understand what contributes to posttraumatic growth after bereavement, Engelkemeyer and Marwit (2008) found that self-worth was a strong predictor of post-trauma growth among bereaved parents. Ogińska-Bulik (2014) examined the role that temperament and resiliency play in posttraumatic growth among bereaved individuals and found that an increased appreciation for life and improved relations with others were the most prevalent areas of posttraumatic growth amongst participants in their study. Results also indicated that posttraumatic growth is more likely to be determined by resiliency (defined as skills gained from coping with various difficult events) rather than biologically determined temperamental traits (Ogińska-Bulik, 2014).

Büchi et al., (2007) found that the death of an extremely premature infant triggered not only a painful long-term process of mourning but also individual personal growth, and that

adaptation processes to loss differed depending on the gender of the bereaved with mothers experiencing more intense grief but also more growth than fathers. Similarly, Taku, Tedeschi, and Cann (2015) examined posttraumatic growth in bereaved young adults who reported experiencing high growth in the domain of relating to others, having more compassion for others or an increased sense of closeness with others, as a result of their experiences of grief and loss.

Interestingly, Currier, Mallot, Martinez, Fuller, and Neimeyer (2013) examined the relationship between bereavement, religion, and posttraumatic growth, and found that those who were bereaved by violent death had higher scores across all domains of posttraumatic growth, but also reported more distress symptomatology. The authors found no correlation between positive religious/spiritual coping and improved bereavement outcomes, however negative religious coping was a strong predictor of poor bereavement outcomes. Results such as these, exemplify a complex connection between religion/spirituality, adjustment to bereavement, and possible growth.

Contemporary grief theorists and grief practitioners now recognize that not only does a best practice approach to working with individuals faced with bereavement take into account the individual grief response, but also explores opportunities not just for reconstitution of pre-bereavement states, but of the possibility of post-bereavement growth (Calhoun et al., 2010; Currier et al., 2013; Neimeyer 2014; Taku et al., 2015). Researchers in the area of posttraumatic growth after bereavement continue to explore the relationship between trauma and growth, and urge for further understanding of the transformative processes that times of traumatic or existential crises can create for individuals, families and communities (Büchi et al., 2007; Calhoun et al., 2010; Taku et al., 2015).

The above sections have discussed varying responses to grief, from complicated grief to posttraumatic growth. The subsequent sections will discuss some cultural considerations in grief response. In addition, an overview of literature pertaining to circumstances around death/loss, such as death/loss due to traumatic or unexpected causes which also impact individual grief responses will be presented.

Cultural Considerations and Grief Responses

Our understanding of concepts such as death, and dying, as well as our expressions of grief and loss, are largely socially constructed (Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008). Cross-cultural considerations of end of life as well as grief experiences are becoming increasingly explored in the literature. What is the acceptable grieving expression or behaviour for one cultural or religious group may seem strange or even offensive to a differing group (York & Stichler, 1985). For example, in grieving, Japanese are often very protective of one another's feelings, aiming to avoid undue sadness among the bereaved group. They usually do not express their grief openly in public, which may appear very passive or rigid to cultural groups more open with their feelings (York & Stichler, 1985).

Amongst Indochinese (Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, Thai, and the Hmong) the Hmong for example are generally Buddhist, and believe that after death, souls go to dwell in a land of benevolent spirits. In infant deaths, Hmong believe that the child may return in the body of another child latter born into the family, perhaps protecting against complicated grief often associated with loss of a child in other cultures (York & Stichler, 1985). Judaic belief includes concepts of death as a passage to an afterlife in a world to come where souls continue to thrive. Jewish people are known to express grief openly after death has occurred and may include a ritual called kriyah, a tearing of the mourner's clothes (York & Stichler, 1985).

Laurie and Neimeyer (2008) compared the grieving responses of African Americans in the U.S.A. with the grieving responses of Caucasians in the U.S.A. Findings from this research suggested that African Americans experienced more frequent bereavement by homicide and reported higher levels of complicated grief symptoms than Caucasians (Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008). In addition, African Americans reported feeling a stronger ongoing bond with their deceased loved one, as well as experiencing greater grief symptoms for the loss of extended family (outside immediate family) (Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008). Further, when compared to Caucasians, African Americans reported a greater sense of natural support systems, despite being less likely to verbalize their loss experiences or seek professional help (Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008).

Although differences of traditional, acculturated or religious perspectives create a vast diversity of beliefs within Aboriginal communities, some common themes may be reflected in end of life issues (Kelly & Minty, 2007). For example, Aboriginal cultures often have different approaches to relaying poor news (Kelly & Minty, 2007). For example, relatives of a terminally ill Aboriginal patient might not want to relay the seriousness of a medical condition (poor news) to their loved one, as positive thinking is thought to promote health (Kelly & Minty, 2007). In fact, some Aboriginal cultures view outward expressions of emotions as inappropriate (Kaufert & Lavalley, 1999).

In attempts to further understand First Nations' conceptualizations of end of life care and bereavement, Kelly, Linkewich, Cromarty, St Pierre-Hansen, Antone and Gilles (2009) explored cross-cultural hospital-based end-of-life care from the perspective of bereaved Ojibway and Cree family members. The participants in the study described death as a community and extended family experience (Kelly et al., 2009). First Nations family member participants also voiced the

need for rooms and services that reflect this community and extended family experience, including space to accommodate a larger number of visitors than is usual in Western society (Kelly et al., 2009). Similarly, Hampton et al., (2010) interviewed Aboriginal Elders in Saskatchewan, Canada, who stated that they and members of their families and communities had experienced policy restrictions when gathering around a community member dying in hospital. Additionally they expressed feeling restricted when attempting to practice spiritual traditions such as smudging. The Elder participants conveyed traditional cultural beliefs that suggest that life is a circle and the spiritual knowledge about end of life is present from birth.

Johnston, Vukic and Parker (2013) highlighted differences in language about what is meant by death in Aboriginal cultural in contrast to language commonly used in non-Aboriginal communities. For example, traditional Mi'kmaq do not use the term 'end of life' since they view the present life as a continuum into a next life. Mi'kmaq traditions associated with the journey to the spirit world are culture-specific and individually determined (Johnston, Vukic & Parker, 2013). Just as culture plays a role in grief response, the circumstances around the type of loss may also impact individual grief response. The next section discusses traumatic or unexpected loss.

Traumatic and/or Unexpected Death

Traumatic and/or unexpected loss describes losses due to varying causes including accidents, suicide or overdose, or homicide (Kristensen, Weisæth & Heir, 2012). Traumatic and/or unexpected deaths are reported to increasingly occur leaving greater reaching impacts on survivors. For example, the World Health Organization (2016) indicates that injuries leading to a traumatic death are of increasing concern and report that it is anticipated that death from road traffic crashes, homicide, and suicide are predicted to become amongst the top 20 leading causes

for death globally by 2030. In Canada, there are reportedly nearly 4,000 suicides per year (Statistics Canada, 2015) which some researchers believe is a vast underestimation (Rahme et al., 2015). Suicide is the ninth leading cause of death in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2014). It is the second leading cause of death in Canada among children and youth aged 10-24 years old, following accidental injury (Rahme et al., 2015). Suicide has reached crisis proportions among First Nations, Metis, and Inuit youth in Canada (Rahme et al., 2015). Overall, Aboriginal youth suicide rates in Canada are 5-7 times higher than rates for non-Aboriginal youth (Health Canada, 2016). The suicide crisis has had devastating impacts in Northern Ontario, where there are many First Nations communities, and where there are large concentrations of First Nations peoples.

Another form of traumatic and/or unexpected loss gaining increasing concern in Ontario is loss due to overdose, specifically, opioid-related overdoses. Ontario's rate of opioid related deaths continues to grow (Dhalla, Mamdani, Gomes, & Juurlink, 2011) and many areas have determined to be in a state of "opioid crisis" (Leece, Orkin, & Kahan, 2015; Moore et al., 2017). The annual rate of opioid-related deaths in Ontario has increased 285% from 1991 to 2015, rising from 14 deaths per million (144 deaths) to 53 deaths per million (734 deaths) over this time (Moore et al., 2017). In 2015, there was 1 death for every 18,797 people living in the province of Ontario, and on average two people died of an opioid-related cause every day (Gomes, 2017). The total number of opioid-related deaths in 2014 far exceeded the number of people killed in motor vehicle collisions in Ontario that same year (Gomes, 2017). Also, of important consideration is the significantly higher number of opioid related deaths in younger populations. For example, in 2010, nearly one out of every eight deaths among individuals aged 25 to 34 years old involved an opioid (Jones & McAninch, 2015). Thus, traumatic deaths are increasing, in particular in Ontario. As traumatic deaths increase, survivors are left to process the loss.

Individuals and families who are processing traumatic deaths are reviewed as a distinct population of griever in the next section.

Traumatic and/or Unexpected Grief

Those who experience bereavement by traumatic and/or unexpected causes may have different grieving experiences than others who are grieving the death of a loved one to natural or expected causes (Wilson & Marshall, 2010). In fact, traumatic loss is evolving as a significant subcategory of bereavement research, and is garnering increased attention (Currier, Holland & Neimeyer, 2006). Several recent studies suggest that individuals who have lost someone to traumatic causes are at higher risk for developing complicated grief (Bonanno et al., 2007; Currier et al., 2006; Provini, Everett & Pfeffer, 2000; Sakinofsky, 2007), as well as an increased risk for poorer grief outcomes such as depression, anxiety, trauma, and even suicide (Agerbo, 2005; de Groot, de Keijser & Neeleman, 2006; de Leo & Heller, 2008; Kessing, Agerbo, & Mortensen, 2003; Mitchell, Sakradda, Kim, Bullian & Chiappetta, 2009). In addition, individuals struggling with complicated grief due to traumatic loss may also experience increased physical health issues such as higher risks for cardiac disease, problematic substance use, and sleep disturbances (Bonanno et al., 2007; Kristensen et al., 2012).

Traumatic loss can also alter some individuals' core beliefs about themselves and their world view (Bonanno et al., 2004). Individuals who lose a loved one due to a traumatic death may additionally have trouble accepting the reality of the loss and subsequently reconstitution, as they may continually re-experience the loss event (Kristensen et al., 2012). For example, individuals who experience loss of a loved one through violence, may replay scenes of the death in their mind, or live with continual intrusive thoughts about their loved one's death (Baddeley, Williams, Tynearson, Correa, Saidon, & Rheingold, 2015; Currier et al., 2006). During a

traumatic loss, individuals also often miss opportunity for final words and goodbyes to their loved ones which can add further difficulty to the bereavement process (Kristensen et al., 2012). Lifton (1982) described traumatic loss reactions in terms of a “death imprint,” which can generate intense feelings of self-vulnerability and anxiety, while at the same time, constricting ability to reconstruct fractured personal meanings in ways that reconstitute a survivor’s sense of self.

In review, the literature above discusses recent literature related to grief theory as well as types of varying grief responses. The next major section will provide an overview of the recent literature being considered by contemporary grief practitioners.

Interventions for Grief

The Efficacy of Grief Interventions

In reviewing bereavement intervention in the literature, it is apparent that there are some debates surrounding how to best support those who are bereaved. For example, some of the literature reviewed suggests that most people will move through the bereavement process regardless of whether or not they receive professional help, provided they have other natural supports in place (Bonanno, 2004; Bonanno, Westphal & Mancini, 2011). Still, other literature highlights a lack of consensus regarding what constitutes “normal” grieving in terms of factors such as length of grief response, severity, reactions, and means of coping (Altmaier, 2011; Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

Although many helping professions by necessity have integrated grief or bereavement work into their practices and many palliative care environments such as hospices provide caregivers with bereavement support when a loved one passes, many bereavement interventions, in general, lack standardization and remain untested (Wittenberg-Lyles et al., 2015). Some

reviews of both qualitative and quantitative research have been undertaken and have summarized the efficacy of bereavement interventions (Currier, Neimeyer & Berman, 2008; Forte, Hill, Pazder & Feudtner, 2004). However, in these efforts, a range of various conclusions have been reported from skepticism to endorsement (Neimeyer & Currier, 2009). For example, Currier et al., (2008) conducted a meta-analysis of all available controlled outcome research on grief therapies using statistical procedures to provide an overview of the concept of ‘grief intervention’ in terms of its effectiveness, as well as examining factors associated with greater or lesser benefit. The findings of their review support the benefits of theory guided research and the argument for further research of carefully crafted therapies specifically for individuals who struggle with reconstitution or growth after experiencing loss (Currier et al., 2008). Similarly, a review by Neimeyer and Currier (2009) indicated that commonalities in evidence-based interventions that proved greater benefit to bereaved individuals included participants being griever who displayed intense and prolonged separation distress and related complications in the aftermath of loss. Neimeyer and Currier (2009) also found that interventions which proved beneficial used repeated and experientially intense ‘retelling’ of the circumstances of the death, and used some form of guided encounter with the memory of the loved one, as in a symbolic monologue or dialogue with the deceased (e.g., through drafting letters to the deceased). In addition, interventions which included attempts to promote ‘restoration oriented’ coping seemed to prove of greater benefit (e.g., attending to current relationships and projecting goals that better fit with the new post-loss reality). Neimeyer and Currier (2009) argued that several of these and other components found to be beneficial in intervention should be considered in future research endeavours. Other researchers, for example, Gitterman and Knight (2016) also argued for further exploration regarding the usefulness of cognitive, experiential, and meaning-making processes in

adjustment to bereavement. Several of these theoretically informed approaches are discussed in the following sections.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

Given the recent shifts in our understanding of grief outcomes towards highly heterogenic responses, it is imperative to establish which types of treatments reduce loss-related distresses and symptoms (Eisma et al., 2015). In this endeavour, there is a growing body of evidence that supports the use of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) in bereavement intervention, particularly as a promising therapeutic intervention for complicated grief (Boelen, de Keijser, van den Hout & van den Bout, 2007; Bryant et al., 2014; Eisma et al., 2015; Papa, Sewell, Garrison-Diehn, & Rummel, 2013).

Currier, Holland and Neimeyer (2010) described complicated grief through the lens of cognitive-behavioral theory, as individuals who are struggling with the accommodation of their loss, experiencing specific problems in integrating the death of a loved one into their autobiographical memory, as well as individuals who experience unrealistically negative and self-blaming patterns of thinking following loss.

CBT interventions for complicated grief usually include components of exposure to avoided bereavement-related components, cognitive restructuring of loss-related negative conditions or thoughts, and/or behavioral activation to counter social and behavioral isolation or withdrawal (Eisma et al., 2015). Exposure is based on the idea that individuals often engage in cognitive avoidance of the loss, and avoidance strategies are argued to potentially block integration of the loss into the individual's autobiographical knowledge base, and towards the overall acceptance of the loss (Boelen, van den Hout, & van den Bout, 2006). The idea is that by exposing a bereaved person to the most painful reality of their loss, there is potential to increase

acceptance of the loss and towards the facilitation of adjustment to the bereavement (Eisma et al., 2015). Behavioural activation is formulated on the basis that many individuals experiencing complications in their grief may become increasingly inactive and socially withdrawn in their participation in occupational and recreational activities (Boelen & van den Bout, 2010; Boelen, van de Schoot, van den Hout, de Keijser & van den Bout, 2010;). Therefore, the CBT interventionist would encourage the bereaved individual to engage in meaningful activities as this can increase positive moods, reduce pathological grief responses, and disconfirm negative cognitions (Eisma et al., 2015).

Dual Process Model

The dual process model of coping with bereavement was first developed to understand the coping processes involved with the death of a partner, and offered understanding on the ways in which people come to terms with their loss (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). The dual process model was first proposed by Stroebe and Schut (1999) who argued that the ‘grief work’ perspectives at the time (mainly developed based on the work of Freud and Kubler-Ross) provided useful guiding principles for understanding the phenomena of bereavement but was lacking in considering the need for a coping model that was stressor-specific. The dual process model addresses this gap and identifies two types of stressors for consideration in bereavement processing; loss-orientated and restoration-oriented stressors. Loss orientation refers to the processing of varying components of the loss experience itself, in relation to the deceased person (e.g., rumination about the deceased person, circumstances and events surrounding the death, yearning for the deceased, and looking at old photos). A range of emotional reactions are involved in this dimension from pleasurable reminiscing to painful longing, and from relief and pleasure that the deceased is no longer suffering to despair and desperation that one is left alone

(Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Restoration orientation refers to process of adapting to a changed world (e.g., through re-engaging in relationships and in work, and experimenting with new life roles) (Caserta & Lund, 2007; Wittenberg-Lyles et al., 2015).

Unique to the dual process model and identified as a central component of the model that distinguishes it from other coping or bereavement theories, is the dynamic process termed ‘oscillation’ during the grieving process (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Oscillation is described as the process of the grieving individual altering between, at times confronting the different tasks or aspects involved with loss, and at other times avoiding them (e.g., seeking distraction by concentrating on various other things) (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). The model proposes that adaptive or successful coping requires both confrontation and avoidance of loss and restoration stressors, as well as the need for respite from dealing with either of these stressors as integral components to adaptive coping (Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

Meaning Oriented Approach

Meaning oriented approaches are showing great usefulness and fit with contemporary grief theory and research (Gillies, Neimeyer & Milman, 2015; MacKinnon et al., 2015; Neimeyer 2012; Neimeyer & Burke, 2015). Interest in meaning in general has grown in recent years, specifically in the area of meaning-making, and is described as the process of restoring meaning in the context of highly stressful or traumatic events (Park, 2010). Although there is no distinct definition for meaning-making in the literature, there is some agreement about what aspects contribute to meaning-making processing (Park, 2010). Park (2010) suggested these aspects include the following: (1) individuals possess orienting systems, termed ‘global meanings’ that provide them with cognitive schema with which to interpret their experiences; (2) when facing situations that have the potential to stress their ‘global meanings’ people assess the

situations and assign new meaning to them; (3) the extent to which that new meaning (situational meaning) differs with their ‘global meaning’ determines the level of stress experienced; (4) the distress caused by the differing meanings initiates a process of meaning-making; (5) individuals attempt to reduce the differences between situational and global meanings and restore a sense that the world has meaning; and (6) this process when successful leads to better adjustment to the stressful event (see also Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006).

Despite some differences in concepts of meaning-making approaches, in terms of grief work, there is consensus that the grieving individual is negotiating the challenge that loss poses to their understanding and functioning in the world (Gillies et al., 2015; Rozalski et al., 2016). When there is an inability to understand the stressful event and find meaning after loss, the severity or duration of grief symptoms may increase (Beaumont, 2013). Specific to individuals who experience unexpected and/or traumatic losses, meaning-making and sense making are consistently reported themes of the grieving process (Bartik, Maple, Edwards & Kiernan, 2013; Begley & Quayle, 2007; Hung & Rabin, 2009; Jordan, 2001; Supiano, 2012). Research suggests that the question “why” a loved one died can give rise to the process of meaning-making for survivors (Bartik et al., 2013).

Of concern, Litchenthal, Burke and Neimeyer (2011) found that an individual’s inability to make sense of a death may be the critical link between the spiritual struggles many bereaved report and complicated grief. This is supported by other recent research contributions (Burke et al., 2015; Rozalski et al., 2016). Recognizing the importance of meaning-making in end of life, Breibart, Gibson, Poppito, and Berg (2004) developed interventions for spiritual suffering in the terminally ill that focus on increasing patients’ sense of meaning and purpose in life. Currier et al., (2013) and Repar and Reid (2014) explored how meaning-making is an important process

cross-culturally, and, in both studies, the authors suggested that being able to make sense of a stressful life event is an important process in which people from many different cultures engage.

Despite the recognition of the importance of meaning in the contemporary grief literature, empirical research has yet to fully explore the process by which individuals construct meaning in response to loss or the form that meaning takes when it is made (Holland & Neimeyer, 2010; Park, 2016; Steger, Frazier, Oishi & Kaler, 2006). Lee, Cohen, Edgar, Laziner and Gagnon (2006) concurred and discussed that despite numerous studies documenting the positive relationship between meaning-making and positive well-being, further exploration is required to fully understand this relationship. Rozalski et al., (2016) recently called for additional support and research for meaning-oriented understandings of adaptation to loss. Specific modalities to elicit meaning-making opportunities are provided by Thompson and Neimeyer (2014), who implored further qualitative research in meaning-making approaches to grief and bereavement, and, in addition, discuss the unique ability that expressive arts and arts-based methods may offer to meaning-making approaches.

Arts-Based Methods

There are strong arguments for the inclusion of arts-based methods in social work research and intervention, given the importance of art and art forms to nearly all cultures (Moxley & Feen, 2015; Thompson & Neimeyer, 2014). At times, individuals find that words cannot accurately depict their experiences and arts-based methods can help to guide a person in their understanding of these experiences. Arts-based methods, therefore, can be of value when exploring existential topics which may be difficult to express or navigate such as spirituality, death, and traumatic experiences that challenge our understanding of world order (Repar & Reid, 2014; Safrai, 2013; Thompson & Neimeyer 2014). Arts-based methods offer a way to explore

both conscious and unconscious feelings without directly discussing them, which may be seen as less threatening to the individual who is experiencing the stressful or traumatic event. For example, Rastogi, Kumar Kar and Singh (2015) reported that in their exploration of grief with an adolescent bereaved female, arts-based methods helped the practitioner to navigate and explore the emotional struggles of the client in a way that may not be possible in other settings, such as routine clinical settings. Arts-based methods can offer a less conventional approach to working with clients, and clients who participate in arts-based methods themselves express positive benefits and a desire to continue to engage in the intervention (Thompson & Neimeyer 2014).

Art and art forms have been central to the human experience of death and loss in nearly all cultures, as a way to memorialize the deceased, depict an afterlife, create legacy and pay tribute to the deceased, as well as used in ceremonial traditions, burials, and prayers (Thompson & Neimeyer, 2014). The arts are an organic support in times of transition in life such as bereavement, and interventions drawing on the arts meld naturally with meaning-focused therapeutic practice (Beaumont, 2013; Thompson & Neimeyer, 2014). The act of creative and expressive art making itself can serve as supportive in the grieving process (Safrai, 2013; Thompson & Neimeyer, 2014).

Repar and Reid (2014) used creative arts encounters when working with hospice caregivers and found that arts-based methods enhanced clinical engagement with the participants and provided opportunity for participants to release stress, grief, and pain. In addition, participants expressed experiencing transformations and feelings of growth, freedom, and hope (Repar & Reid, 2014). Safrai (2013) found that arts-based methods assisted an individual in end of life in their transition from existential dread and anxiety, to a more accepting awareness of the dying process. In addition, benefits of arts-based methods were cited to include improved quality

of life for the patient, improved self-expression and meaning making, and an increased ability to relate to the therapist and to connect with family and staff members (Safrai, 2013). Bereaved individuals participating in arts-based methods may receive support through art making and engaging in the creative process itself, but also through meaning-making opportunities in metaphoric communication related to loss, and through memorialization of one's relationship with the deceased (Thompson & Neimeyer, 2014). Group intervention for bereavement has also become increasingly available and is discussed in the following section.

Group Work in Bereavement

While some people may choose individual grief counseling, group interventions may offer a very beneficial and explicit experience, particularly in the forming of new and meaningful relationships (Grebin & Vogel, 2007). Groups offer unique interpersonal interactions, which can contribute to pivotal transformation (Burlingame, Fuhrman, & Johnson, 2004; Morgan & Roberts, 2010). There has been an increased development of support groups in the self-help movement as well an increased interest in how best to support the bereaved among professionals of many disciplines (Steiner, 2006). Some researchers argue that group work has been underused as an intervention with grieving individuals, despite the fact that group membership can offer bereaved clients a number of distinct benefits (Knight & Gitterman, 2014). There is a plethora of evidence supported by varying disciplines regarding the efficacy of group modalities in general, in a range of contexts and settings, and applied with various client populations (Barlow, Burlingame & Fuhrman, 2000; Rubel & Kline, 2008). In fact, some research indicated that membership in a group may be as effective as individual counseling, and, in some contexts, even more effective (Vlasto, 2010). Other literature suggested that group membership may be useful in

diminishing experiences of social withdrawal and isolation, as well as helping bereaved individuals in advancing in bereavement processes (Forte et al., 2004; Piper, Ogrodniczuk, Joyce, Weidman & Rosie, 2011). While a clinician can reassure the individual that they are not alone in an individual counseling setting, reassurance is more meaningful when clients hear it from similarly challenged group members as other members' support has a heightened credibility and unique impact (Knight & Gitterman, 2014).

Other advantages of group membership in the context of bereavement include individuals' ability to learn new ways of coping and managing their grief as they listen to the experiences and grieving journeys of other members (Knight & Gitterman, 2014). In this sense, individuals more advanced in their bereavement journey are reminded of the gains they have made as they hear about the challenges of other members, reciprocally, members who remain more challenged are encouraged by the advancements they witness (MacNair-Semands, Ogrodniczuk, & Joyce, 2010). Another suggested benefit of group membership is the potential for a member to experience altruism, referring to the benefit received by a member giving, not just receiving, assistance to another member (Knight & Gitterman, 2014). This ability to give to others has been reported to be empowering and to enhance an individuals' feelings of self-efficacy, promoting adaptive coping in bereaved individuals (Knight & Gitterman, 2014).

Piper, McCallum, Joyce, Rosie and Ogrodniczuk (2001) suggested that complicated grief may be an example of where group therapy appears to be the treatment of choice. Furthermore, Pesek (2002) argued that support groups appear to be helpful for disenfranchised grievers because the format can facilitate opportunity for grievers to express socially what he or she feels must remain private elsewhere. One of the highlighted advantages of both therapy style and

mutual support groups stems from the access to both social and emotional support for those bereaved who often feel lonely or isolated in their pain (Grebin & Vogel, 2007).

In terms of therapy groups, rather than “mutual support” formats, there have been a number of studies that have investigated the efficacy of various grief intervention group formats. These studies have included diverse populations and various types of grief (Grebin & Vogel, 2007). The group formats explored include a wide variety of creative interventions, for example, guided imagery, creative writing, music therapy, and painting. The positive outcomes of creative group involvement in these studies included the ability to process emotional pain associated with grief (Olson & McEwen, 2004) and decreased symptomology, for example, depression (Tonkins & Lambert, 1996). While these studies outline only a few examples of positive outcomes associated with creative interventions in group formats, they provide some convincing arguments for the usefulness of both group interventions and creative approaches when working through grief and loss (Grebin & Vogel, 2007).

A Summary of the Literature

Grief is a response to bereavement that almost every person will experience at some point in their lives. Recent literature suggested that how an individual processes loss is unique, and that not all individuals need support or intervention to assist them during this process. However, some individuals can experience debilitating and sometimes life-threatening responses to loss, such as in complicated grief or in complicated spiritual grief responses. Recent research has identified that particular populations are at a higher risk for experiencing struggle in their journey with grief, in particular those who experience loss due to unexpected and/or traumatic deaths. One of the common themes identified as a factor leading to complications in processing grief has been an individual’s struggle to find meaning in the face of loss and in reincorporating a new

world view (one without their loved one) into their day to day lives. Ways to support individuals who experience unexpected and/or traumatic death/loss are becoming increasingly important to explore, as traumatic deaths rise. Of growing interest for grief practitioners are interventions aimed at not only facilitating resiliency and reconstitution of pre-bereavement states but those that might also promote post-traumatic/bereavement growth. One such modality showing promise but in need of further exploration is meaning-oriented practice that incorporates experiential, arts-based intervention.

Methodology and Procedure

Broadly, the literature reviewed in the previous chapter highlights a burgeoning interest in exploring heterogeneity in the human experience of grief. The unique issues that individuals who experience traumatic and/or unexpected losses face, coupled with the often inadequate social response, leaves survivors at greater risk for negative mental health outcomes following loss. Only a handful of rigorous qualitative studies exploring expressive art therapies or meaning-making in bereavement have been reported to date (Thompson & Neimeyer, 2014). Ways in which to support those who are bereaved, as well as opportunities not just for reconstitution of pre-bereavement states, but of the possibility of post-bereavement growth, also require further exploration (Dekel et al., 2012; Triplett et al., 2012).

The objective of the research described herein was to explore in-depth the experiences of participating in an arts-based support group for traumatic and/or unexpected loss. The goal was that such an exploration would aid in meeting the need for increased qualitative study in this area, and, in addition, help us to better understand the intricacies of bereavement due to traumatic and/or unexpected loss as well as the usefulness (or not) of an arts-based bereavement support group in terms of promoting meaning making processes. The research question asks: What are the experiences of bereaved individuals who participate in an arts-based support group for traumatic and/or unexpected loss?

Research Design

Qualitative methods were chosen for this study. Qualitative methods are well suited to a research aim of understanding human experience where little prior knowledge exists. Qualitative methods also typically produce findings that are pertinent and relevant to practice (Kennedy & Lingard, 2006), an important consideration for a practice-based profession such as social work.

As qualitative inquiry is based on exploring the human experience, thus, it is a suitable methodology for this research question, which focuses on human experience. The aim of the current research was to further learn, understand, and hear the personal experiences of individuals who experience grief and loss of a loved one, and who participate in an arts-based bereavement support group. Qualitative methods have also been cited as foundational to the theoretical basis of complex interventions, determining their acceptability and confirming their “active ingredients” to tailor them to participants’ needs (Craig et al., 2008; Sandelowski & Leeman, 2012).

Host Site

This research study was hosted by the Algoma Public Health in Sault Ste. Marie, ON. Algoma Public Health (APH) is a public health agency committed to improving health and reducing social inequities in health through evidence-informed practice. APH offers comprehensive services through delivery of its Community Addiction & Mental Health Services to individuals who experience severe and persistent mental illness, and to individuals who are experiencing problematic substance use.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited through direct referrals from several agencies in the area, as well as through advertisement from community agencies (self-selection sampling) through posters and on their Facebook websites including Canadian Mental Health Association Sault Ste. Marie - Algoma Branch; ARCH hospice; Ontario Addiction Treatment Centres; Ontario Works; Ontario Disability Support Program; Neighbourhood Resource Centre; the Indian Friendship Centre; Children’s Aid Society of Algoma; Community Mental Health and Addictions Program – Algoma Public Health; Algoma University; Sault College; Iris Bertrand Counseling; Best Start

Hubs – Albion, Boston, and Chapple locations; Sault Area Hospital Crisis Intervention Services; Healing Arts Centre; Detox; the John Howard Society; and Algoma Family Services. There is currently a waitlist for supportive bereavement services in the Sault Ste. Marie community. A participant information statement (see Appendix A) was provided to the above collateral agencies in the community who offer both grief-specific as well as general counseling and supportive services.

Participants

Participants included individuals who were seeking support, and who were experiencing grief from bereavement of a loved one to unexpected and/or traumatic causes. Inclusion criteria stated that participants must be over the age of 18 years old and been bereaved for a minimum of six months. According to research, individuals' energies in the early aftermath of tragic loss are often focused on surviving everyday life, and it may be more beneficial for them to participate in support groups later in their grieving journeys at a time when the loss has begun to be integrated into their day to day life (World Health Organization, 2008). There were initially seven participants in this study, however, one participant only attended two of the weeks of the group and then indicated that she would not be continuing in the study due to personal circumstances. Six participants attended all of the group sessions. According to Thompson and Neimeyer (2014), support groups can produce a range of responses with a smaller number of participants who can respond to both the researcher's inquiries, as well as to the other group members' input. Although continuously evolving, research seems to give preference to time-limited, closed membership groups of between six and eight members (Piper et al., 2007). Smaller sized and time-limited groups are hypothesized to likely contribute to the intimacy and consistency essential to promoting mutual benefit in group settings (Knight & Gitterman, 2014).

All of the participants in this study identified as females. The participants in this study were grieving traumatic and/or unexpected losses to causes including suicide, overdose, and fatal accident. All of the participants were grieving the loss of immediate family members including the loss of children, parents, siblings, spouses, and, in some instances, combinations of multiple losses of such. The participants' length of bereavement ranged from 11 months to 4 years. Three of the participants had participated in some type of grief support/intervention prior to this group, three participants had never participated in any grief specific supports. All of the participants reported that being a member of a grief specific arts-based group was a new experience for them.

Procedure – The Arts-Based Group

Prior to the onset of the group sessions, I met with each participant individually to explain the study. Interested participants were then asked to sign a consent form (see Appendix B) and provide demographic information (see Appendix C). Upon completion and understanding of consents, the group sessions were held once per week for five consecutive weeks.

This study involved participation in a group program for individuals experiencing grief due to traumatic/unexpected bereavement, which used a variety of experiential, arts-based methods and meaning-making approaches. The group's focus was to engage in arts-based and experiential exercises that explored participants' conscious and unconscious feelings, thoughts, and behaviors in order to foster opportunity for discovery. The overall goal of the group was to support the grieving process of the participants by merging active art making with opportunities for reflections. As explained by Thompson and Neimeyer (2014):

In our Western culture, traditionally, therapy's goal was to resolve the patient's problems. Consistent with the medical model, even art therapy focused on diagnosis, analysis, and interpretation... The view has evolved and now there is a greater appreciation for art

making as healing in and of itself, with outcome measured in terms of the client's experience of meaning and satisfaction with the process. (p. Foreword)

Thompson and Neimeyer (2014) suggest a general architecture for arts-based grief therapy sessions to consist of four components; 'filling in', 'decentering', 'aesthetic analysis' and 'harvesting'. The framework described that 'filling in' is the process of group members clarifying their circumstances, sharing their loss stories or concerns, or sharing any resounding feelings. It is noted that during 'filling in,' although the general concern or reason for attending the group should be shared by participants, it is important in this type of group not to focus on the suffering or any pathology that individuals may have experienced.

The process of 'decentering' is then to guide participants to 'decenter' from the concerns in order to enter a space where they can play on an imaginal level, a process supported by the use of arts-based methods. After the 'decentering' has taken place and the client has entered into the imaginal world by art-making, the process of 'aesthetic analysis' occurs where careful attention is given to the shaping and creating art, and to the art work itself that emerges. By adopting an experiential attitude of reflecting on what has occurred, we can allow the work and creative encounter to teach us something we may not already know or give us insight to make a new meaning. The process of 'harvesting' is then to reflect on the ways that what has happened, or how what we have created or experienced, may have something to do with our everyday lives. The hope is that this new knowledge or response may give us a new direction, action, or insight towards making a meaningful change in a person's sense of the world and self.

I developed each weekly session for this group around the general architecture described above. For example, each session began with 'check ins' and discussion of resounding feelings and thoughts or the 'filling in' component. Next, each session encouraged the 'decentering'

component through exploring various expressive arts activities. After each new modality was explored, the group discussed the process of creating the art work and the art work itself, which is modeling the ‘aesthetic analysis’ component. Finally, each session included opportunities for ‘harvesting’ during discussions after each activity and reflections on any meanings made or insights gained from the art-making experiences.

The first two weeks of group began with an introductory activity to encourage group cohesion and ease tensions or anxieties often felt when approaching a helping intervention, which lasted around 10-20 minutes. Each session was two and a half hours in duration, with a 10-15 minute break mid-way. Each week consisted of two general components: (1) creative writing, and (2) an expressive arts activity. Various expressive and creative arts-based methods were explored in the two components such as poetry writing, letter writing, painting, sculpting, and collaging. Discussion, reflections, and debriefing occurred throughout and for the final 30 minutes each week. A copy of the support group weekly session outline can be found in Appendix D.

A number of arts-based interventions for bereavement explore different modalities to facilitate supportive grief groups. I based the development of the activities during the group on these resources. For example, Thompson and Neimeyer (2014) offer a plethora of expressive arts exercises for grief practitioners to adapt and modify in *Grief and the Expressive Arts: Practices for Creating Meaning*, which is separated into specific art modalities and includes components such as music, creative writing, theatre and performance, dance, and visual arts activities. Similarly, Moss (2012) offers a plethora of creative writing techniques for adaption in *Writing in Bereavement: A Creative Handbook*.

I developed the group structure and weekly schedule by adapting, modifying and drawing inspiration from a number of these different expressive arts activities in conjunction with the space and resources available for this project, and also my own professional background. For example, it would not be feasible to incorporate dance into the support group design due to the room size available for the sessions. As different modalities may elicit different ways of expression, I chose a combination of creative writing and expressive arts activities for each session. I have experience with many visual arts modalities being an avid painter and have had experiences facilitating arts-based groups in past employment and volunteer roles, which also contributed to the architecture of the sessions, and my overall preparation to facilitate this type of group.

Data Collection – Post Group Interviews

Following completion of the group sessions, participants met with me to conduct in-depth qualitative interviews, which were audio-recorded. All of the interviews were conducted in private rooms at Algoma Public Health. A semi-structured interview format (See Appendix E) was used to guide individual interviews with participants, as this helped to facilitate thinking about the topic areas but was open enough to allow room for the interviewer to ask spontaneous questions leading to deeper exploration and dialogue about the topic (Creswell, 2013). The average length of interview was 50-minutes long. In-depth interviews were employed to collect information as they provided an opportunity to learn about the experience of the group members through the eyes and language of those living the experience (Van Manen, 1990). The interviews explored the participants' experiences participating in the arts-based support group, their grief experience, as well as the art pieces that they had created. According to Yin (2008), in-depth interviews with a smaller number of participants can explore a diversity of meanings of

participation in therapy and can be a robust method allowing researchers to enter the lived experience of the participants.

Participants' body of art-works were photographed throughout the group sessions with special consideration given to exclude any identifying information of the participant or deceased loved one. Participants were asked to bring their art with them to the interviews so that they could be easily accessible for discussion points. One participant did not have their artwork present with them during the interview as they had forgotten it, but they were easily able to remember each activity. Photographs of the participant's artwork were available for visual reminding.

The qualitative interviews were conducted subsequent to a one-week break from the group. The one-week break was scheduled to allow participants time to digest their experiences of participating in the group. It was also within close-proximity to group completion to ensure that the essence of the experience was easily recallable in the participants' memories.

Participants were reminded at the onset of the interview that they were able to discontinue at any time, and that they did not have to answer any questions with which they were not comfortable. Participants were offered additional support in the community if the interviews or participation in group sessions triggered emotional distress which was unmanageable, or should they desire additional supportive services.

One participant was not interviewed after their participation in the group. Upon completion of the sessions, the participant was unable to be contacted to set up an interview for several weeks. Upon contact with this participant, the researcher learned that the participant had relocated out of country and would be unable to participate in an interview. Thus, qualitative analysis was conducted using the transcripts of five interviews.

Analysis of Data

Data was collected in the study through audio-taped interviews which were first transcribed, then examined using thematic analysis as described by Van Manen (1990). Thematic analysis is the process of uncovering and isolating a theme or themes that are embodied in texts, such as in the verbatim interviews (Van Manen, 1990). I first read through the entirety of each individually transcribed interview, taking time between each interview and transcript to reflect upon what was read. To derive themes from the data, a detailed line-by-line approach involved the researcher reflecting on what each sentence or group of sentences disclosed about the individual's experience (Van Manen, 1990). During this read through, all statements pertaining to the participants' experiences were assigned a meaning unit code. The meaning unit code was correlated with the first initial(s) of the participant's pseudo name, followed by an assigned number for each statement being coded, followed by the meaning of the statement. For example, the following section of a transcribed interview with Sophia:

Interviewer: Okay and was there anything that you... any activity that you didn't enjoy?

Sophia: I found the postcard really really hard

Interviewer: Okay

Sophia: I was like it was umm not it was more gut wrenching and it tapped into an area where I didn't want to tap into but I forced myself too

Turned into the meaning unit: S8: I found the postcard exercise really really hard it was more gut wrenching and it tapped into an area where I didn't want to tap into but I forced myself too

I extracted a total of 355 meaning unit statements from the transcribed interviews. Next, all the meaning units that were extracted from the interviews were examined in order to identify re-occurring or very similar structures of meaning. To do this, the meaning units were printed on

paper and cut out and placed individually on a table. This assisted this researcher, being a visual conceptualizer, of visually organizing re-occurring or very similar structures of meaning, and eventually in processing any higher level of correlation.

Re-occurring statements were recognized and placed one on top of the other (clustered) (Creswell, 2013). For example, “I really enjoyed every exercise we did” and “there weren’t any exercises that I didn’t enjoy” were two statements that could be clustered under ‘enjoyable.’ At this time, I gave significant reflection and time to moving these coded meaning units into groups which spoke to ‘common essence’ of experience.

At this point during the data analysis, I began down a path feeling that the groupings were coming together with labels related to ‘conversation’. For example, meaning units related to expression in a group could have been labelled as ‘safe dialogue’. However, during this process I referred to my journal entries which were recorded while facilitating the group sessions, and while listening to the recorded interviews. When reflecting on these journal entries, and as sub-themes began to emerge, I realized that ‘movement’ rather than ‘conversation’ was a truer depiction of the common essence of experience. This process of reflexivity guided this researcher in ensuring that the themes emerging were grounded in the experience of the participants, rather than in the interpretation of the facilitator.

Please see the attached theme log book (Appendix F) for an example of several of the different ‘groupings’ that were reflected upon as the data analysis progressed. As example: a cluster of meaning units related to ‘connections’ ended up being separated into two piles labelled ‘connection with others in the group’, and ‘connection to loved ones’ as further consideration given to the essence of the experiences resulted in two different clusters. Another example of this stage of analysis is how upon deeper reflection, two clusters (‘a safe space’ and ‘sharing and not

feeling alone'), collapsed into a sub-theme ('The Vehicle'), as both clusters described how participating in the group (the group itself as catalyst), gave them a way/place to work/move in their grief processes.

This process was repeated until all of the meaning units were compared for contrasts and similarities and were organized into groupings/clusters and thus sub-themes began to emerge (Van Manen, 1990). Through this ongoing process, 12 sub-themes were developed from the data; the starting point, roads travelled, a new language, the vehicle, the passengers, presence of loved ones, a space for spirituality, communication with loved ones, hard work, new realizations, forward movement, and continuing the journey. Reflection on the relationships between these sub-themes as well as my journaling entries, led to the development of four major themes: Exploring New Territories, Travelling Together, Crossing the Borders and Getting Somewhere. In the following chapter the major themes are discussed in detail and compared with existent literature.

Methods of Verification

Creswell (2014) recommends that qualitative study employ at least two measures of validity strategies. Efforts were made to ensure that several measures of validity were obtained. One way to ensure validity discussed by Creswell (2014) is to include rich, thick description of your findings, and can be demonstrated through the inclusion of direct participant quotes that reflect the study's themes. In the following chapter, the findings of this study are validated by employing this method of including rich, detailed participant quotes.

A second method of verification used in this study was the inclusion of the participants' art works during the interview process. As Thompson and Neimeyer (2014) explain, a limitation to interviews as a sole source of data collection is that they often depend only on the language of

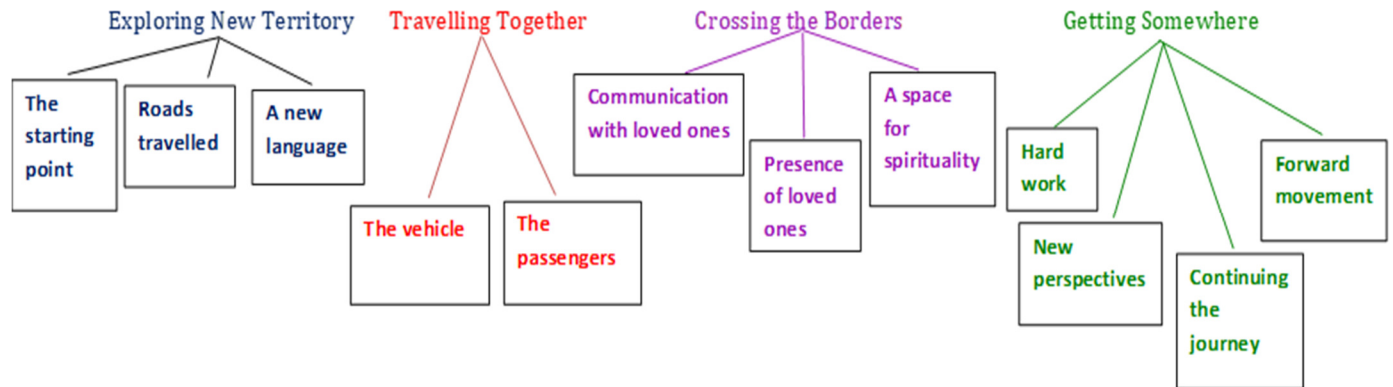
the participants to describe their experiences. Thus, they suggest that in order to understand how bereaved clients use creative therapies, the art works produced in therapy themselves warrant study as a source of data or should be incorporated into the interview process. Included in the next chapter, photographs of the participants' art works are embedded amongst the description of findings.

Finally, the inclusion of the researcher's background and interest in exploring the topic as well as the use of journaling in order to demonstrate the researcher's active role of reflexivity, are recommended as a means of clarifying researcher bias (Creswell, 2014), and are described at various points throughout this study at introduction, data analysis, and in the implications for personal practice.

Findings

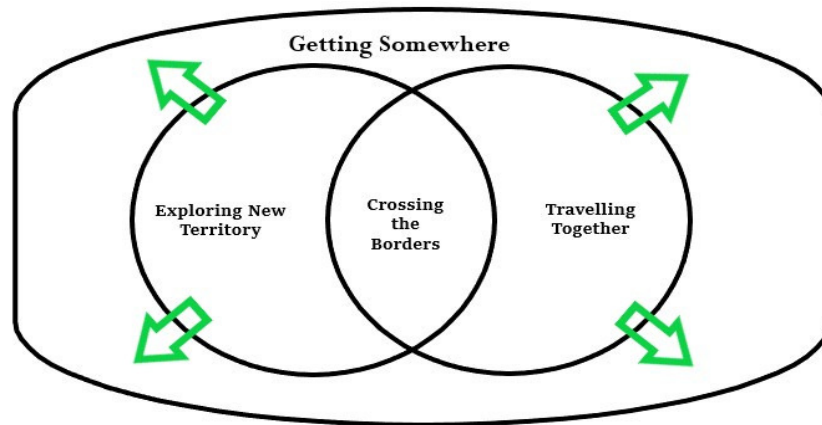
An Overview

The following diagram offers a visual representation of the twelve sub-themes, and corresponding four major themes that emerged from participant's descriptions of their experiences of participating in the arts-based bereavement support group:



The main themes; ‘Exploring New Territory,’ ‘Travelling Together,’ ‘Crossing the Borders,’ and ‘Getting Somewhere,’ come together offering an allegory of the overall experience as travel or as part of a journey. Together the themes also infer a going toward “somewhere different,” beyond a getting back to where they started (reconstitution), but rather going in “new directions,” exploring “some new place/space” (growth). The participants’ voices in this study were fairly consistent with some of the more recent literature being put forth regarding the use of arts-based methods of intervention in trauma work, in grief and bereavement, and in eliciting opportunities for discovery or posttraumatic growth.

Further reflection on the themes and how they are connected also led me to consider the relationships between the themes and any significance of theme relationship to the overall findings of the study. The following diagram represents the synergetic relationship between the themes:



Collectively, the participants described their experience in the group as being helpful in their personal grief journeys, in their understanding of themselves, and/or in making meanings in relation to their loss(s). Of significance, several participants in this study demonstrated signs of growth, making statements specifically attributing this growth to their participation in the group. All of the participants voiced that the act of creating art in the group, ‘exploring new territory,’ and processing/ discussing the art as a group, ‘travelling together,’ bonded them. They expressed that these two aspects of participation led them to feeling comfortable, safe, and inspired to explore existential topics, spiritual beliefs, and current relationship to their loved one(s) who passed, ‘crossing the borders.’ All of the participants identified learning new things about themselves, about their grief or their beliefs, or about making new meanings and continuing the journey - the ‘getting somewhere’ (growth), and expressed that the first three themes described above (‘exploring new territory,’ ‘travelling together,’ and ‘crossing the borders’) were related and all contributing factors to their feelings of ‘getting somewhere.’ The synergetic relationship between these themes may be an important consideration for contemporary research which calls for a better understanding of the ways in which the traumatically bereaved are supported, and for further understanding of the ways we might foster meaning-making and posttraumatic growth

opportunities for those experiencing traumatic and/or unexpected losses. Next, I explore each of the main themes in greater detail and compare this material with the literature.

Exploring New Territory

Starting Point

This first theme reflects aspects of the participant's experiences of exploring new territory. For example, participants discussed a 'starting point' where past experiences with interventions for grief or other issues were shared. All five participants shared that they had not previously attended an arts-based grief-specific support group prior to this group, although several group members had previously sought out individual grief counseling sessions. For example, one individual when asked if they had ever participated in a support group before stated: *"umm not directly myself, more as a support to someone else."*

I was really struck by the bravery of each of the group members in this study, none of whom had previous experience with traumatic loss bereavement groups, nor arts-based grief intervention groups, but nevertheless, embraced the group forum and each art modality offered. When speaking to the various art modalities (e.g., painting, collage, and sculpture) used in this group, some participants indicated that they had not used some of the modalities since childhood. For example, one participant shared: *"Yeah... I think of course in school umm high school I took collage but like I don't really remember anything significant."*

I noted that as participants in the group became more comfortable with one another, and with the arts-based forum of the group, they seemed to be more willing to share their art, and the personal meanings/stories behind each creation. For example, after the first activity in the first week, only two group members felt comfortable enough to volunteer to share their poem. However, in the last session, I noted that every group member took turns sharing their work, with

none of the members opting for a 'pass' when it came to their turn for sharing. Similarly, Forrest-Bank, Nicotera, Bassett, and Ferrarone (2016) informally observed that many youth in their study on the effects of expressive arts interventions with urban youth from low income neighborhoods presented as shy and too embarrassed to share their poetry at the onset of the project, but seemed to gain confidence as sessions progressed, increasingly volunteering and enjoying sharing their work. All five participants also stated that they enjoyed the arts activities and would have returned for further group sessions; all remarked that the group was too short, for example: *"it was way too short it was like umm it was like a tease almost...cause you know it was so much fun and so much like umm the exercises you gave us were awesome."*

This is also consistent with other researchers who found that despite not having previous experience with arts-based interventions, the majority of participants expressed significantly enjoying expressive arts activities. For example, Nainis et al. (2006) found that 88% of the participants in their study had never attended art therapy groups prior to their study, and 92% stated that they would like to do art therapy again. Similarly, Coholic, Loughheed, and Lebreton (2003) found that the children in their holistic arts-based group had fun and enjoyed themselves while participating. Furthermore, the children voiced that they wanted to return for more group.

Roads Travelled

In exploring new territory, participants described trying differing art modalities as new tools or new paths for expression, 'roads travelled.' Each of the participants shared their experiences with the art, including aspects of their experience of the creative process, what it elicited for them, and how different roads or art modalities were experienced differently. For example, one participant described her experience of her creative process/path as: *"I might've started with a vision and it's completely different... I just sort of went with the flow and umm had*

no idea what it was going to look like.” Another participant expressed her experience with the creative process as:



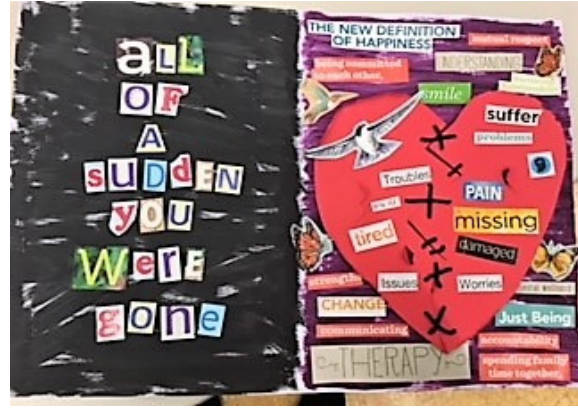
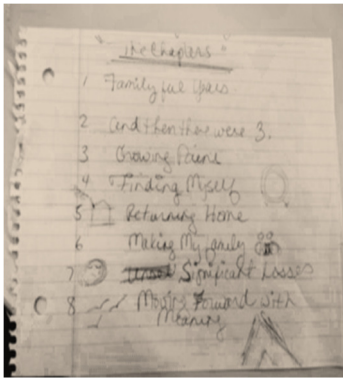
*“and even like the feathers like I said just the color of them I was really drawn to it... it's almost like it just jumped out and I didn't have to think about it - it just was there and worked.”*The

photograph shown here is an example of one participant's creation in the lost and found exercise where participants represented what

they had found in their lives, and what they had lost in their lives onto heavy stock paper using various art supplies (paint, feathers, magazines, pencils, glitter, markers, etc.)

Participants also shared how the “act of creating” resonated with them, and how they experienced positive benefits from “the creating.” Zeltzer, Stanley, Melo, and LaPorte (2003) suggests that the multisensory experience of the creative process can aid in increasing energy and activity level, in stimulating memory, and in freeing emotions. Similarly several of the participants in the current study also described their individual experiences with the creative process and its ability to ‘free’ emotions, one participant stating:

“visually seeing like you have to visually see it whether it's in writing or drawing or sculpting whatever yeah, yeah it's an awakening it's a realization...its staring you in the face you cannot say it does not exist because its right there and you drew it with your own hands...”



(From left to right) First, a photograph of a participant's 'table of contents' creation which involved participants thinking of their life as if differing chapters in a book. This participant titled their work: "The Chapters," and included: Familyful Years, And Then there were 3, Growing Pains, Finding Myself, Returning Home, Making my Family, Significant Losses, and Moving Forward with Meaning. Second shown is a photograph of one participant's creation of a 'ditch daisy' made with modelling clay as a representation of something found in nature which she identified with during a free association writing exercise. Third, an example of one participant's creation using collage and markers during the lost and found exercise (described previously).

Thompson and Neimeyer (2014) also described how the creative process can elicit emotion, stating that the "process of searching for a poem, reading one provided by the therapist or writing an original one, even when not explicitly about death or grief, can convey important emotions and metaphors that allow for release, understanding, and transformation" (p. 29). Whether in the form of a poem, or visual arts modalities such as sculpting, collage, or painting, creating art facilitates opportunity for the individual to observe their thoughts, feelings, and emotions (Thompson & Neimeyer, 2014).

Participants also described how different art modalities were experienced differently. For example, some participants expressed during the sessions that they found the creative writing activities (for example, the free association writing where individuals were prompted to write about various subjects such as the weather or nature in ‘speed rounds’) easier as the exercises tended to be more structured than the visual arts activities (for example, the lost and found exercise) which were less structured and relied more heavily on personal interpretation. One participant described this differential: *“some of the writing pieces I found it easier just in terms of kind of the direction if that's how maybe my creativity flows differently.”*

Coar (2010) supports this finding and found in her study of using mandalas to support grieving female adolescents that using a variety of art modalities in the group assisted the girls to find many ways to get in touch with their emotions.

A New Language

Participants also described how expressive arts provided them a new way to express their feelings, ‘a new language’ for example, one of the participants shared: *“sometimes I feel like just want to ignore those feelings ...and umm so these types of activities are definitely helpful for me not knowing like how you express this stuff.”* Another participant describes this as: *“it was... like just a way to express your feelings in a different way instead of using words you used pictures.”*

Other participants described how art-making facilitated expressive dialogue in a unique way that normal conversation wouldn’t have: *“because when we are working on it we were able to discuss it with each other and... I was able to talk about what I was doing and what it meant to me and that I wouldn't have done in just a conversation.”* Another participant states:

“I definitely feel like it uh the format would be a really good outlet for you know... anybody and it would be great even for kids right that don't know how to to maybe

verbalize some of the stuff that they're experiencing but having a forum to direct...how they can express themselves it can be an outlet you know."

These statements seem significant as they may indicate an advantage to arts-based interventions over traditional 'talk therapies', which can be potentially restrictive when words themselves cannot/won't best capture an individual's experience. Cole, Jenefsky, Ben-David and Munson (2018) similarly found that some of the young adult participants in her study had reflected on how an arts-based group context had facilitated a way for them to be understood through artistic expression in a manner that they had not previously experienced.

Finally, participants in this study collectively expressed that art making created opportunities to explore new parts of themselves and explore new meaning: *"like you know I'm an in the box person and it's really hard for me to come out of the box so I found that the activities really made me try and come out of my box."* Another example:



"it just got your brain thinking like what's the meaning behind that cause I always look behind meanings and patterns and symbols."

Pictured to the left, a photograph of one participant's creation from the lost and found

exercise (described earlier). These statements describe how the act of creating art fostered new discovery through personal reflection, and through sharing about one's self and one's art.

Thompson and Neimeyer (2014) argued that a powerful component of arts-based methods is their ability to lead to a dual communication; intrapersonal (within the individual) and interpersonal (to the viewer – group leader, group members, general public, etc.). This

communication is fostered through two characteristics of art-making; the receptive (listening, reading, viewing), and the expressive (creating art individually and in groups).

Travelling Together

The theme of ‘Travelling Together,’ emerged from the data which included statements about the importance participants gave to making connections and developing relationships with others in the group , ‘the passengers,’ as well how the group dynamic and format helped accommodate them ‘the vehicle’, as they explored themselves, and their traumatic grief.

The Passengers

All five of the participants reported repeatedly that they felt that the other group members helped them not only to open up about themselves and to share more, but also to expand their thinking and perspectives. It was apparent that the social aspect of the group strongly resonated with the participants as being helpful. Dyregrov (2006) identified that strong social support was a protective factor against complicated grief in their study especially subsequent to traumatic or violent deaths. The current study supported this finding. It was clearly expressed by the participants that the connections they made with others in the group was an important aspect of their overall experience. For two examples:

“like it would sound silly to other people but it was like it hurt to breathe and it wasn't like I had an asthma attack or anything physical it was just the amount of sadness in me and it was not nice but it was reassuring when I heard others describe their physical pain cause you think oh my god is it just in my head like it feels so real,”

and, *“hearing other people's stories and you can just feel their their loss, their trauma, their hurt, their pain, it was like wow okay I'm not the only one.”* Knight (2006) indicated that one of the benefits of support groups for those who have experienced trauma is the mitigating of

feelings of isolation due to the realization that others in the group have had similar experiences. This develops a sense of connection between group members, provides avenues to share with others and learn from others, may improve self-esteem and coping skills, and may help individuals to learn to trust again (Knight, 2006). Several studies reviewed have found that a small group format of art intervention groups can assist in reducing social isolation and increasing opportunities for connection and support (Waller, 2002; Weisberg & Wilder, 2001). One participant describes how the group members each contributed to a ripple effect of sharing which helped to expand the boundaries of conversations and bonds between members:

“A lot of people are uncomfortable because they don’t know what other people believe like everybody has different beliefs so you know when one person brought it up and then somebody else said something and then that person felt comfortable talking more and they opened up more about it... and then you can see where more people talked about it and their experiences with it and different things that happened to them and it seemed to really it like it seemed to really bond the group.”

The bonding of group members and sense of community that a group forum can create can be extremely valuable to those who have experienced traumas. Sharpe, Joe and Taylor, (2013) found that survivors of suicide who attended a survivor support group said they found it more helpful than seeing a psychiatrist/psychologist due to the support within the group and the feeling of being understood amongst group members. McKinnon and Chonody (2014) found that 78% of participants in their study stated that grief support group forums were helpful but that specific groups to traumatic loss were most helpful. Similarly, McMenamy, Jordan, and Mitchell (2008) found that 95% of the participants who attended support groups found them

helpful, but that support groups aimed at suicide survivors specifically were more helpful than those for general bereavement.

Some of the benefits associated with bereavement group work include the potential for members to experience altruism, or the benefits received by an individual giving not just receiving support (Knight & Gitterman, 2014). In addition, benefits may include learning adaptive coping (Knight & Gitterman, 2014), as well as normalization for those bereaved who often feel lonely or isolated in their pain (Grebin & Vogel, 2007). This can be of heightened importance when facilitating intervention for traumatic and/or unexpected losses. In this study, participants repeatedly echoed that they felt some comfort knowing that they were not alone in their pain.

Other literature suggests that benefits of group membership may also include mutual aid as sharing in a group format may be useful in diminishing experiences of social withdrawal and isolation, as well as may help bereaved individuals support each other in advancing bereavement processes (Forte et al., 2004; Piper, Ogrodniczuk, Joyce & Weidman, 2011).

The Vehicle

Participants made numerous statements about their experiences being part of a supportive group format, and how the group provided them with a unique space, ‘the vehicle’. The participants strongly voiced that they felt the group was a safe space for them to share intimate and personal details about themselves and about their grief experiences, for example: *“it was an opportunity to have my own place to... just express myself to just whatever let it go channel it out or just share without worrying about what anybody or how anybody was going to be affected by it.”* Another participant expressed:

Similarly, Ferszt, Heineman, Ferszt & Romano (1998) found that some of the participants in their study involving an arts-based bereavement group also expressed that the arts group facilitated the expression of deep sorrow and anger in a safe place. The participants shared that arts-based intervention also created a way of expressing challenging feelings while experiencing a sense of control and accomplishment, and it allowed individuals to see themselves in a new way (Ferszt et al., 1998).

Crossing the Borders

The theme, ‘Crossing the Borders,’ emerged from participants’ discussions regarding aspects of the spiritual realm in connection to their participation in the group, including how the group created ‘a space for spirituality’ for them, feeling the ‘presence of loved ones’ while participating in the group, and describing how the arts-based activities facilitated a ‘communication with loved ones.’

A Space for Spirituality

Several participants discussed how their experience in this group formed a unique space for them to have deep and meaningful discussions about varying topics such as spirituality/after life/mediums, and other existential-related dialogue. For example:

“I can recall a couple conversations that we all had that were really you know outside of the box but they were conversations that you know we all participated in and it was you felt safe talking about it like for example the one point where we were talking about umm psychics and people's beliefs... and things like that and you know everybody seemed comfortable discussing.”

Some research suggests that when someone experiences a violent and/or traumatic loss, they are more likely to turn to philosophic and spiritual sources for comfort and comprehension

(Lichtenthal, Neimeyer, Currier, Roberts & Jordan, 2013). In the current study, during the group sessions, participants engaged in many conversations that may have been viewed as taboo in certain settings. At times, the expressive arts activities fostered opportunities to approach topics naturally, or in a more comfortable manner. For example, during the lost and found collage exercise, many participants expressed that they had ‘found’ signs from their loved one since their passing. At one point, I recall this led to a dialogue about various personal beliefs surrounding lost loved ones maintaining ‘spiritual presence,’ which led to discussions surrounding individuals’ experiences connecting with their loved one through the use of psychics. These types of discussions may have been considered kind of ‘taboo topics’ in other settings that felt less safe. Expressive arts have been used in other settings where sense of safety is important in facilitating discussions of taboo topics. For example, Neuschula and Page (2018) used metaphor and other expressive techniques in their study involving families impacted by sexual abuse to encourage an ongoing sense of safety while managing discussion of taboo topics.

Here one participant discusses the unique space that the group created for them and how discussions in the group fostered open-mindedness about seeking new ways to make connection to those in the spiritual realm:

“others... sought out you know because they felt like they needed more answers or connectedness they sought out that spiritual outlet you know whether it be through traditional means you know or umm through a medium you know or somebody that has uh identified a connection to uh to someone on the other side of whatever that is... you know yeah that it’s not so kooky that it’s something that umm is interesting you know it’s something that I probably would consider umm that that I might not have in the past.”

Pictured below is an example of one participant's pencil drawing representing what she had found during the lost and found exercise (previously described).



All of the participants discussed the importance to them of having a non-judgemental space to share and explore spirituality. As indicated in the participant's statement above, individuals don't always have an area in their lives where spirituality and existential exploration is possible. For example, they may have social connections or family that wouldn't support the possibility of 'spirits' leaving signs, so an individual might not share this type of experience with their normal social supports (such as friends or other family members). This may be of heightened importance to individuals who have lost a loved one to traumatic and/or unexpected losses. These types of losses can destroy an individual's understanding of themselves, their world, and can lead to a spiritual crisis (Burke, et al., 2014). Caserta, Lund, Utz, and Vries (2009) found that embracing one's religion or spirituality as a coping mechanism may be protective and may encourage positive change, renewed meaning in life, and may foster personal growth. In fact, for some people, considering life through a context of faith and assimilating it based on spiritual belief systems can assist in taking tragedy and moving it somewhere more psychologically manageable. Pargament, Smith, Koenig, and Perez (1998) referred to this as positive religious coping and defined this as "an expression of a sense of spirituality, a secure relationship with

God, a belief that there is meaning to be found in life, and a sense of spiritual connectedness with others” (p. 712). The use of positive spiritual or religious coping has been found to predict increased psychological well-being (Pargament, et al., 1998). Additionally, Nelson-Becker and Canda (2008) argue that within social work, spirituality is connected to the human search for a sense of purpose and meaning. Coholic (2017) argues that arts-based methods can be used specifically to facilitate discussions and reflections about spirituality as they offer a way to explain the person’s experiences with spirituality in a way that verbal discussions may not provide. During the exercises where reference or reflection on the deceased was encouraged in the art making, it was apparent that much of the art reflected spiritual themes, and in sharing the art works, participants shared discovering personal meanings related to spirituality. Similarly, Coholic (2017) argues that arts-based methods are an excellent vehicle for engaging in purposeful reflection and meaning-making with respect to one’s life.

Presence of Loved Ones

During the interviews, as well as in the group sessions, several of the participants also discussed feeling the presence of their deceased loved ones. Group members shared different signs they felt their loved ones had gifted them since their passing and felt validated that others had had similar experiences and felt their loved ones as well. Several group members expressed feeling the ‘presence of their loved one’ during the group sessions. Sharing such deep and intimate thoughts aided to bond group members with one another. When one participant was asked if she had made any new meanings during participation in the group, she shared:

“just I think maybe a reassurance based on relating to other people about their beliefs in something beyond and that your loved ones stay present with you in some way umm I think that uh insight was kind of evoked there or maybe reassured.”

Another participant expressed that she felt that group members' deceased loved ones were meeting in heaven and watching us as we were meeting for our group:

“what really made me feel good is knowing that all these peoples’ their loved ones there are all together up there... knowing that all their loved ones are together in heaven looking at us going oh boy... like they’re meeting together like look at them all down there.”

This statement expresses poignantly the sentiment that the arts-based supportive group and all of its components fostered an opportunity for participants to explore or ‘Cross the Borders’ of earthly and spiritual realms and make meaning of the group experience.



Pictured above left to right; one participant's creation during the post-card activity where participants wrote letters to their deceased loved ones and designed post card imagery, and secondly, one participant shows “signs from heaven” she has found since her loved ones passing during the lost and found exercise.

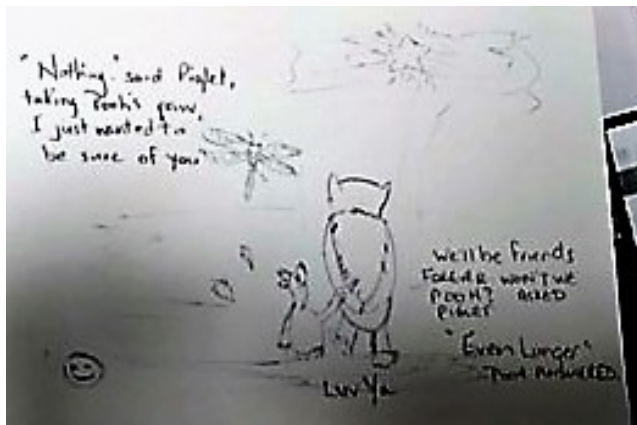
Communication with Loved Ones

The theme, ‘Crossing the Borders,’ also contained statements from three of the five participants about how the exercises facilitated a way for ongoing ‘communication with their loved ones.’ All of the participants brought up one particular activity - the postcard activity which occurred on the last week of the group sessions and seemed to hold significant meaning to

each of the group members. Participants were provided oversized template postcards, with one side blank for a design/picture of their choice, and the opposite side containing lines for writing a message, a location for a stamp (with various stamps to choose from), and a space for an address. Participants were asked to write to their loved one in the style of a postcard – a “where I am at” or ‘what’s happening now.’ One participant describes this activity as: *“I liked the writing part umm cause I always find I’m talking to him anyway so it was nice to umm tell things like how if he were to come home how I would talk to him so that was really nice.”* The postcard activity may have provided opportunity for participants to have ongoing dialogue with the deceased. Weiskittle and Gramling (2018) recently completed a systematic review of the use of expressive arts interventions with the bereaved and suggest that visual art modalities often foster participants’ conservation of ties with their deceased loved ones (as an indicator of the efficacy of the intervention) thereby aiding in the grief process and healing.

Some interventionists argue that one of the advantages of creating art works is how the griever is able have a tangible object that captures their feelings, emotions, and thought-processes to refer too. Coar (2010) found that art gave participants a chance to acknowledge their loved one by using art techniques and gain a better understanding of their loss. Not only is the act of creating of value, but providing the participants with a tangible, permanent object for reflection was of benefit (Coar, 2010). When revisited, these objects may serve as reference points in a griever’s journey, they may create ongoing connections to the deceased loved one, or they may inspire new or expanded realizations (Ferszt et al., 1998). More recently, Kohut (2011) described the process of a bereavement art therapy group centered on scrap-booking. The author described how the scrapbooks provided the participants the ability to grieve by giving them an object that could be revisited on an ongoing basis or as needed. It also served as a support for the

need to pause from grieving, as the object was easily able to be put away when necessary. As a record, the book shared grief and memories with others outside of the group. The follow-up evaluations at the conclusion and three months later indicated the importance of being with others who are grieving, having the chance to share their grief and art making as giving new life to the deceased by memorializing them (Kohut, 2011). In the current study, several participants also discussed how the art activities facilitated memorialization of and communication with their deceased loved ones, for example:



“that activity gave you an opportunity to have that conversation to reinvigorate those memories you know about what conversations you would have or what would you say like if you were sending a postcard just to say hey this is my current event or this

is what's happening right now or this is what I wish I could tell you.”

Shown above, a photograph of one participant’s design on her post-card (activity previously described).

Another participant describes her experience of feeling signs and communication with her deceased loved one in drawing an image of her wedding on the post-card (pictured below) and subsequently finding a video of her wedding the next day (which had been lost since the year of her wedding and never really seen by anyone else in the family):



“and you could tell that he was there like I mean how do you explain that like how do you explain you drew it on Wednesday and you found your wedding video on Thursday and you watched it on Friday... so umm it's really hit a spot with me.”

When sharing, the participant expressed how transformational this experience was for her personally in affirming her belief in God and in afterlife. Some researchers highlighted that internal religion/spirituality relates to better adjustment through the process of meaning-making, and that having made meaning is the pathway through which religion/spirituality is related to adjustment after bereavement (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema & Larson, 1998; Murphy, Johnson & Lohan, 2003; Park, 2005; Uren & Wastell, 2002).

Getting Somewhere

Ferszt et al. (1998) argued that after artwork is created in grief work, it serves as a mirror reflecting back to the art maker in many ways. Works of art may uncover previously unknown aspects of the art maker to themselves. They may also uncover insights and metaphors which emerge from the art that was created by, recognized by, and then remembered by that person (Ferszt et al., 1998). Being able to make new meanings, form new assumptions or new beliefs about oneself or the world after stressful life events may help to foster posttraumatic growth (Vanhooren et al., 2015). This kind of growth can be understood as a significant shift in a persons' connection to oneself, in enhanced relationships with others, in a fuller appreciation for life, in an increased sense of personal strength, in different priorities, and in a richer spiritual life (Vanhooren et al., 2015).

All five of the participants described how the arts-based bereavement group assisted them in getting somewhere else in their grief process, including the challenges of ‘hard work,’ gaining ‘new perspectives’ (making meanings), movement along the journey ‘forward movement’ (growth), and the arts-based activities as tools for continued work ‘continuing the journey.’

Hard Work

Participants discussed how their experience in the grief group was challenging at times and discussed what was involved in the work for them. ‘Getting Somewhere’ involved processing some emotions or feelings that some individuals may have been avoiding, ignoring, or were unable to reach. One participant described this as: *“I’m not that good about umm expressing grief with other people and so that was hard but good.”* The participant describes that despite it being challenging to express their grief with others, they found benefit in the experience. Others described the ‘hard work’ as how a specific activity was challenging for them, for example:



“and then having to write a letter to my sister it’s like where do you even begin so the drawing of the postcard was really hard and then the letter writing was especially hard and then putting the address on there its heaven and so it’s just whammy after whammy after whammy and

so yah the postcard was very hard for me.” Another participant describes how being a member of a group, listening to painful stories and emotions and expressing you own grief, can also be ‘hard work’: *“hearing other people’s stories is difficult but so I mean it’s a balance its good and*

then scary and taxing too." Ferszt et al. (1998) argued that the act of creating and making meaning of one's art can take profound energy and be demanding, while at the same time



potentially invaluable in fostering courage and growth in the face of loss.

Pictured left, a photograph of one participant's creation during the grounding exercise previously described.

New Realizations

Also highlighted in the theme 'Getting Somewhere,' all of the participants expressed that they had learned new things/made new meanings from the activities and from their participation in the group, whether it be about themselves, their beliefs, their grief, or where they wanted to go. For example, one group member describes her experience with art and learning something new about herself as: *"Yeah it was like... really interesting like why I had to think about why I wrote what I wrote like why those were important things in my life... there was umm yeah some family and just different meaning like that."* Another participant describes this as:

"and so essentially like being this place umm was sort of interesting... so when you're writing the poem you're sort of visualizing yourself also being this place which is sort of... relaxing but mind blowing at the same time."

Some studies indicated that finding meaning is related to increased feelings of well-being.

Weiskittle and Gramling (2018) argue that creating meaning is the leading mechanism of change.

As such, best practices in grief intervention aim to assist individuals in exploring ways to foster meaning making through continued bonds with their deceased loved one, exploring the meaning

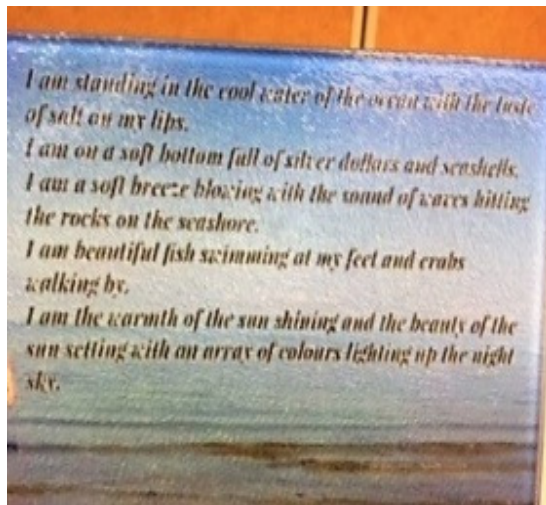
behind their loss, and encouraging the process of reconstructing life without their loved one. Thompson and Neimeyer (2014) offer that traumatic and unexpected losses may challenge a bereaved individual's ability to make meaning or contend with the reality of senseless violence, grapple with the trauma of suicide, or experience the sudden demise of a loved one without warning. Attig (2001) argued that in these instances, meaning reconstruction requires deep exploration, prompting us to 're-learn the self' and 're-learn the world' as both may be profoundly altered in the face of traumatic loss.

Participants discussed how they made new meanings and formulated new connections:

"Overall it was a great exercise very umm thought-provoking and glass shattering," And:

"Well I think I had a little aha moment in that last activity and I don't I don't know if it was just a combination of you know a sequence of things that had happened in that week or whatever but umm and some who knows like those things happen for a reason sometimes right so umm the timing of it or just the exercise itself umm it it was kind of my favorite I think."

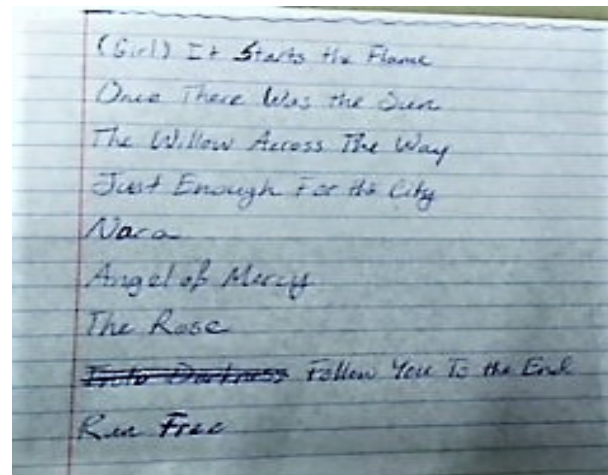
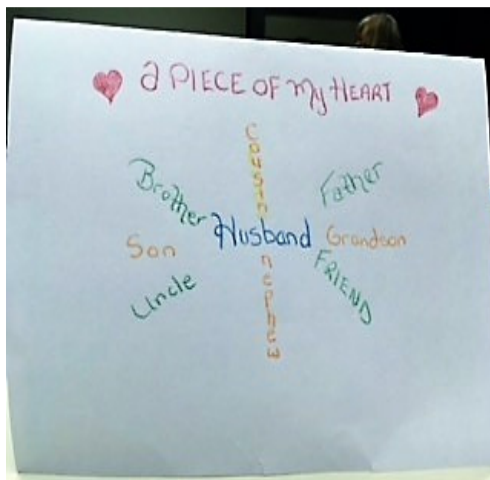
One participant described how their participation in the group was helpful in their experience processing loss: *"yeah it did because you know I don't think I would've thought of some of that stuff."* Neimeyer and Sands (2011) argued that making meaning of loss



encompasses both the ability to process the event story of the death itself, and the ability to access the back story of the relationship to the deceased in a healing fashion.

Shown here is an example of one participant's poem created during the I am my Safe Place exercise which she then transferred onto a glass frame. The poem reads:

"I am standing in the cool ocean with the taste of salt on my lips, I am on a soft bottom full of silver dollars and seashells, I am a soft breeze blowing with the sound of waves hitting the rocks on the seashore, I am beautiful fish swimming at my feet and crabs walking by, I am the warmth of the sun shining and the beauty of the sun setting with an array of colours lighting up the night sky."



The first image shown above is an example of one participant's representation of what she had lost in her life during the lost and found exercise. The second image shown is an example of a participant's 'table of contents' created during the chapters of our lives exercise previously described. This participant used song titles as chapter titles for her life including; Angel of Mercy, Follow You To the End, and Run Free.

Forward Movement

Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) argued that a marker for posttraumatic growth can be an individual's ability to see new possibilities or uncover new strengths within themselves, have a new or renewed appreciation for life, and an experience of shifts in their spirituality.

Each of the participants made statements about how the group helped them to move forward in their journeys or described aspects of wanting to move forward, which they attributed to the group. Some individuals described how their participation actually accelerated or moved them along in their grieving journeys: *“in terms of my loss it's been a year in September and... I'm still on the road to recovery but just doing this... it did accelerated it.”* Another participant describes this as: *“I don't think that the umm like the... progression would've went that way if I hadn't been in the group.”*

Also themed in ‘forward movement’ participants voiced aspects of where they wanted to go, or what they hoped for in their futures:



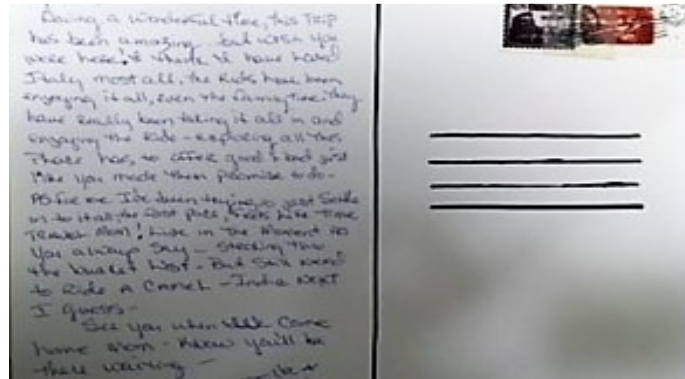
“I learned... a lot from that I learned where I'm at where my mind is at uh where I need to be where I want to go at least I want to go somewhere beautiful instead of dwelling in the darkness and the pain it's like half of me wants to be happy again and I'm striving for that so that

brings hope.”

The picture shown above is an example of one participant's creation during the postcard activity. The participant's statement above demonstrates hope and positivity as something for which to strive. Prati and Pietrantonio (2009) argued that interventions aimed at increasing optimism, social support, and specific coping strategies may help to facilitate positive changes subsequent to trauma.

Vanhooren, et al. (2015) indicated that an important shift in an individual's connection to oneself, and in an increased or richer spiritual life, can be understood as posttraumatic growth.

One participant describes gaining a change in her self as a result of participation as: *"I guess maybe some open-mindedness about spirituality."* Pictured below is another example of a postcard written to a deceased loved one:



Continuing the Journey

Each of the participants also made comments about how they were continuing to reflect on exercises from the group, or how they were, or intended to, continue to use arts in their lives post-group as a way of ‘continuing the journey.’ This highlights a significant advantage to arts-based methods. Individuals have the ability to easily transfer enjoyable art modalities and exercises into their day to day lives, share with their friends, and create meaningful new opportunities for expression and discussions with their families. One participant described how they continue to think back to the exercise involving guided imagery stating: *"I have thought back to my place of comfort since participating in this group and its kind of a repeated image for me now."* Many participants discussed how this group reminded them of how useful art is as a tool, or how enjoyable they find utilizing it, for example:

"writing or journaling is therapeutic there's no doubt about it so uh it just I think uh brought to the forefront more things that are useful and valuable to me that I had like I have in my toolbox but again we don't always utilize them for ourselves,"

while another participant states: *“I haven’t done any art like this in a few years I’ve done some journaling and stuff but haven’t done art like this and I think I would like to maybe work on a few more things at home I think I had fun doing this so I think I might continue.”*

Several participations discussed their plans for continuing the expressive arts modalities on their own accord such as writing to their deceased loved ones: *“I used to have a book where I write down my feelings... I would like too sometimes just tell him stuff... so that would be a good activity to continue.”* One participant described how the arts activities in the group inspired her to initiate her own art project with her daughter:

“I was looking on Pinterest and I found this piece... and my daughter I went and got canvas and it has an abstract background were working on it and so we have started to work on art and it was a sort of reminder like I used to do stuff like that.”

As the participants in this study became more comfortable with the arts activities, and increasingly recognized their value as a tool for discovery, they appeared more courageous in their art making, in their self-examination of the art and its meanings, and in their sharing of their experiences. Ferszt et al. (1998) reported similar findings in their arts-based bereavement group, stating that as their participants’ perceptions and beliefs were confronted, challenged, and shifted, they began to discover new possibilities, one of which included ways to explore their newly discovered courage outside of the group.

Gillies and Neimeyer (2006) argued that a grief interventionist’s role is to foster a constructive process that encourages meaning making and that aids in reshaping the bereaved individual’s shattered world, renews their sense of order, facilitates insights, and offers reprieve from the often-experienced pain of grief. Overall the findings of this study would seem to support arts-based interventions used in a supportive group format as an effective tool to achieve

these aims, and, furthermore, foster posttraumatic growth. An important consideration is that posttraumatic growth does not necessarily mean that the individual experiences a reduction in pain or distress. Gamino, Easterling and Sewell (2003) found that personal growth did not transpire for individuals without the experience of distress. Often the meanings realized by the bereaved involve learning how to become someone who can carry the weight of their own pain or distress (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006).

Conclusion

This study has considered contemporary research on the heterogeneity of grief responses, the leading empirically supported grief interventions, and ways to best support individuals towards posttraumatic growth when faced with traumatic and unexpected losses. The findings in this study provide a rich and in-depth exploration of five individuals' experiences in an arts-based supportive group for traumatic losses. There have only been a handful of qualitative studies to date that have ventured similar endeavours (Thompson & Neimeyer, 2014). However, the current study was consistent with much of the recent literature presented. Collectively, the participants herein described their experience in the group as being helpful in their personal grief journeys, in their understanding of themselves, and/or in making meanings in relation to their loss(s). They voiced that they continued to feel pain and distress related to their loss, but at the same time and of significance, several participants in this study expressed signs of growth, making statements specifically attributing this growth to their participation in the group. Each of the participants voiced that they enjoyed the arts activities, the creative process, and opportunities for memorialization and ongoing communication with their deceased loved ones, as well as a safe place to explore spirituality and other existential issues. In addition, they each expressed the importance of exploring these phenomena as part of a group of individuals who had similarly experienced traumatic loss (i.e., suicide, overdose, accident). The shifting in understanding of the experience of grief has prompted exploration of new approaches to support those who are bereaved, which may be particularly relevant to those who are bereaved by traumatic and/or unexpected causes, where risks for complicated grief are higher.

Opportunities and avenues for individuals to make meaning and/or facilitate post-bereavement growth also require further empirical exploration (Dekel & Solomon, 2012; Triplett

et al., 2012). Although creative arts have been used in grief, arts-based interventions that are empirically supported remain under investigated as an intervention amongst diverse bereaved populations. Most of the expressive arts intervention studies to date have focused on younger bereaved populations, with more attention to adults of both genders, circumstances of loss, as well as cultural diversity as it relates to experience, called for in the future (Thompson & Neimeyer, 2014). The current study met its aim of adding to the building knowledge of the usefulness of arts-based support groups for traumatic losses; however, further exploration is certainly necessary in this relatively new area of study.

Implications for Practice

Professional

The literature reviewed herein established that there is a growing need to further understand the services and supports that will best serve those who are bereaved, and bereaved by traumatic and or unexpected causes. Although there is little data specific to a Canadian context, several studies have reported that the experience of grief from bereavement can have both physiological, as well as socio/emotional effects (Bailey, Hannays-King, Clarke, Lester and Velasco, 2013; Berg, Lundborg & Vikström, 2017). Physiologically, bereavement has been found to temporarily impair the immune response system, which has been linked to various diseases (Berg et al., 2017). There has also been a reported association between child loss and diagnoses of depression, as well as child loss and number of hospitalizations for mental outcomes (Li, Laursen, Precht, Olsen & Mortensen, 2005). The most severe statistics point to an increased risk for mortality in those individuals who are bereaved. This is of heightened importance in Ontario, and particularly in Northern Ontario, as we know that traumatic and/or unexpected deaths are occurring in staggering numbers (opioid crisis and suicide rates in local

First Nation's communities) leaving greater impacts on survivors (Dhalla et al., 2011; Gomes, 2017; Rahme et al., 2015). Stroebe and Schutt (1999) argued that as practitioners, it is important to enhance our capacities and understandings of what contributes to effective coping for individuals experiencing grief from bereavement.

Social work is well suited to explore models and interventions aimed at improving coping. Fundamental to social work's strengths perspective is the recognition of a client's potential and capacity to harness resources (Rice, 2002). As traumatic losses are on the rise, for example, the increasing numbers of suicide deaths in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2015), social workers will undoubtedly be increasingly called on to provide grief support to those traumatically bereaved. Meaning-oriented approaches are showing great usefulness and fit with contemporary grief theory and research (Gillies, Neimeyer, & Milman, 2015; Neimeyer 2012; Neimeyer & Burke, 2015; MacKinnon et al., 2015).

Arts-based methods have shown to be useful in assisting with meaning making for bereavement (Neimeyer & Burke, 2015). Social workers in particular have the necessary skills to utilize arts-based methods in effective ways as they are trained to be creative and be critical thinkers with open minds (Coholic, 2017). Consideration by the profession should also be given to how best to support the recent influx of refugees in Canada. Many immigrants seeking refuge in Canada are victims of trauma, as well as traumatic bereavement. The above information all provide strong arguments for the inclusion of arts-based methods in social work research and intervention given the importance of art and art forms to nearly all cultures (Moxley & Feen, 2015; Thompson & Neimeyer, 2014).

Personal

My experience facilitating this group impacted/alterd my own personal meanings related to grief, added to my understanding/beliefs in 'universal order' and fostered personal growth.

Like the participants in this study, I, too, felt that I was embarking on a journey.

The initial decision to specify an arts-based bereavement group for traumatic and/or unexpected loss resulted in part, from the research reviewed indicating that many bereaved individuals adjust to loss without intervention (with higher complications in those bereaved by traumatic and/or unexpected causes), as well as my own experience during preparation for this study, with losing a friend to suicide.

Prior to this loss experience, I had really only experienced personal loss in a less traumatic way. I had experienced the loss of my grandmother as a teenager to a long battle with cancer, orchestrating her own funeral (she was an ordained minister), her saying goodbye to me, explaining her transition to me and reassuring me that she would always be present with me. Although this loss remains significant for me, and I continue to grieve such an important influence in my life, I was able to make sense/meaning of this experience, see benefit in the loss (termination of physical suffering), my spiritual beliefs were affirmed in that I gained a personal 'knowing' that there was afterlife and belief that our loved ones remain present with us (as she promised, I still feel her presence).

Subsequent to this transformational loss experience, I had not experienced the loss of any significantly close individual until the recent loss of my friend to suicide. I had been with him just weeks prior to his decision to end his life. I countlessly replayed our last conversations and the signs that he was unwell and questioned my abilities in clinical work, having missed opportunities to help him during our conversations. Although not intentional, facilitating this group served as a vehicle to process and explore some of my own grief related to traumatic loss.

I, too, was exploring new territory in facilitating a bereavement group with such deep and raw emotional content. Although I did not share with the group members, as I was there to facilitate their participation, I, too, felt comfort, reassurance, and validation from the other group members who shared their pain, their regrets and guilt, and their thoughts and beliefs surrounding spirituality and afterlife. In addition, I, too, experienced personal growth as a result of facilitating this group. I have gained reassurance in my clinical ability to support individuals who are experiencing deep sorrow, pain and trauma. This experience has also affirmed my professional practice goals, to continue to develop as a facilitator of meaning-oriented arts-based interventions, aimed at promoting post-traumatic growth.

Limitations to the Study

This study met its aim at exploring the experiences of individuals who participate in an arts-based support group for those bereaved by traumatic loss. Future research could explore the topic using a mixed method study design including the qualitative methods utilized herein, as well as a quantitative measure of growth (such as the posttraumatic growth inventory tool). This may assist to strengthen arguments for the usefulness of arts-based interventions in a supportive group format in eliciting meaning-making and posttraumatic growth. It may have also been beneficial to interview the participants at the onset of the group, and then after completion of the group, to develop a baseline or trajectory of growth to better correlate meanings made or growth specific to the intervention.

This study explored a small number of participant experiences. Some challenges arose when recruiting for this study. One challenge noted was the time frame commitment required to attend an arts-based group. Each weekly session lasted two and a half hours in duration, which is significant, however, some participants still ran out of time to complete their projects during

group hours. Another factor which impacted recruitment may have been the limited public transportation offered in the research site area for individuals who reside outside of the city limits. For example, one of the participants in this study resided in a First Nations reserve community and had to arrange rides to/from the group sessions.

Another limitation of this study to note was that all of the participants in this study identified as female. Perhaps men's experiences might have offered a richer data set. Additionally, culture was not identified/explored with the participants for the purpose of this study. Future research could also include comparisons of the usefulness of arts-based bereavement groups amongst varying bereaved populations.

Appendix A



Letter of Information Laurentian University School of Social Work

MSW Student – Nicole Falldien, B.S.W., R.S.W.
Email: nx_falldien@laurentian.ca

Thesis supervisors:
Drs. Diana Coholic & Leigh MacEwan
Laurentian University School of Social Work
dcoholic@laurentian.ca, 705-675-1151 ext. 5053
lmacewan@laurentian.ca, 705-675-1151 5053 ext. 5059

Project: Exploring Participants' Experiences in an Arts-Based Support Group for Loss to Traumatic and/or Unexpected Causes

You are invited to be a part of a MSW research study exploring the experiences of those who have lost a loved one to traumatic or unexpected causes through an arts-based support group. My interest is in knowing what people think and feel about taking part in a support group that uses art.

In this study, the terms 'traumatic and/or unexpected causes' means someone who has lost a loved one to causes such as loss to suicide, loss to drug overdose, or loss to homicide. For the purpose of this study, only those who have lost a loved one for longer than 6 months can participate.

If you choose to be a part of this study, we would first meet to discuss and complete a consent form, as well as to get some general information from you. After this first meeting, you would be asked to attend five (5) weeks of an arts-based support group where you will create pieces of art and have some discussions about your loss. There will be two leaders for the group at all times - myself, and an experienced counsellor from Algoma Public Health. Next, I would ask you to meet with me for an interview to talk about what it was like to be a part of this group, and this could take anywhere between one to two hours. The interview will be scheduled at your convenience, and will take place in a private room at Algoma Public Health.

Any personal information that I collect, such as your name or email address, will be kept private and confidential. However, as this research study involves sharing with a group of people, I cannot guarantee that your personal details you share within the group will stay private by the other group members. Also, you should understand that there are certain situations where I may have a duty to report information you share with me, such as if you share you are going to harm or hurt yourself, or if you share that you are going to harm or hurt someone else.

If you give me your permission by signing a consent form, I may publish the results of this study in academic journals or books. In any publication, your personal information will be protected so that you cannot be identified.

If you decide to be a part of this study, you are free to stop at any point in time. If you need more support than what this group can offer you, let us know and we can talk about other places in the community you can go for help.

I cannot guarantee or promise that you personally will receive any benefits from this study. It is my hope, however, that participants may benefit from this study as at times, individuals find that words cannot describe their experiences and arts-based methods can help to guide a person in their understanding of these experiences.

I thank you for considering participating in this research study. If you have any questions at any time, I can be reached by email at: nx_falldien@laurentian.ca. I would be happy to answer any questions or concerns you might have. My supervisors, who are listed above, can also be contacted at any time during this process.

Appendix B



Participant Informed Consent Form

Study Title: Exploring Participants' Experiences in an Arts-Based Support Group for Loss to Traumatic and/or Unexpected Causes

Investigator: Nicole Falldien, B.S.W., MSW Student

Thesis Supervisors:

Drs. Diana Coholic & Leigh MacEwan

Laurentian University School of Social Work

dcoholic@laurentian.ca, 705-675-1151 ext. 5053

lmacewan@laurentian.ca, 705-675-1151 ext. 5059

Nicole Falldien is a candidate for the degree of Masters of Social Work in the School of Social Work at Laurentian University and is investigating the experiences of individuals who have lost a loved one to suicide.

The purpose of this study is to begin to understand grief responses, as well as to explore the experiences of those participating in an arts-based bereavement support group. Your participation in this study involves the following commitments:

- Completion of a demographic information form
- Completion of a participant consent form
- Attending five (5) consecutive weeks at a bereavement group (at Algoma Public Health) with each session lasting two and a half (2.5) hours in length
- Allowing the researcher to take photographs of your art works
- Participating in an in-depth research interview when the group is done that will take approximately 1-2 hours of your time

The individual interview will be audio-recorded. This will allow me to transcribe (type out) the interview for the purposes of understanding our conversation and your ideas about grief. You should know that discussing your viewpoints may cause some anxiety and/or fatigue. You may request a break at any time during the interview process. There may be some benefit from your participating in this study, as at times, individuals find that words cannot accurately depict their experiences and arts-based methods can help to guide a person in their understanding of these experiences.

Any personal information that I collect, such as your name or email address, will be kept private and confidential. This information will be kept in a locked office on a password protected computer for one (1) year time frame before it is permanently deleted. However, as this research study involves sharing with a group of people, I cannot guarantee that your personal details you share within the group discussions will stay private by the other group members. Also, you should understand that there are certain situations where I may have a duty to report information you share with me, such as in situations where you share that you are going to harm or hurt yourself, or if you share that you are going to harm or hurt someone else.

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary and you may withdraw participation at any time, without penalty or consequence. If you become upset or need more support, the following

local resources are available to you for free:

Walk-In Counseling Service:

Tuesdays 11:30am-7:00pm
Canadian Mental Health Association
386 Queen Street
705-759-0458

Crisis Intervention Services:

Sault Area Hospital
750 Great Northern Road
705-759-3398

If you have any questions or concerns about this study or about participating, Nicole Falldien can be reached by email at: Nx_falldien@laurentian.ca or you may contact the thesis supervisors listed above.

Please note that participants may contact an official not attached to the research team regarding possible ethical issues or complaints about the research itself.

•Research Ethics Officer, Laurentian University Research Office, telephone: 705-675-1151 ext. 3213, 2436 or toll free at: 1-800-461-4030 or via email: ethics@laurentian.ca.

I agree to participate in this study, and I have received a copy of this consent form.

Participant's Signature:

Date:

Witness:

Date:

Appendix C



Participant Demographic Form

Gender: _____

Age: _____

Length of bereavement: _____

Relationship to deceased: _____

Previously attended bereavement/grief therapy or support: Y _____ N _____

If you would like to be notified of the findings of this study, please include your email address below:

Email: _____

Appendix D

Group Outline

The group is formatted generally beginning each week with introductions, check-ins, and a group cohesion activity. Subsequent to these activities, the group engages in two components (1) a creative writing component, and (2) one or two visual arts components. This is followed by group discussion, debriefing, and personal reflecting.

Week 1:

Introductions, housekeeping items, introductory go around, discussion about what we hope to gain from the group session (members can share their stories of loss), discussions regarding confidentiality and creating a holding space of care and compassion for what may be shared.

Get to Know You Game – grab a question from the bag and answer the question in a circular pattern in the group. Questions include things like: What do you think makes a good best friend? If you could be any animal for a day what would you choose? If you could travel to anywhere in the world, where would you go?

Creative Writing Component - Create a Personal Mantra Exercise – Activity Goal: Exploring personalized symbols can convey important emotions and metaphors that allow for release, understanding, and transformation (Bardot, 2008). This activity encourages individuals to find comfort and to reaffirm their personal strength in times of grief and loss using imagery and words combined in a simple, accessible form.

- description of “Mantras”, providing examples, discussion of usefulness, introduction of exercise.

This is done by asking individuals to consider/write down answers to the following questions: What is a fear of mine? What would counter that fear? What is my proudest achievement? How did I make it happen? Why did I do it? Now take most impactful words and highlight them. Begin to scratch out words such as ‘the’ or ‘and’ or that don’t hold meaning, as this may help to determine which words are “most impactful”. Play around with the adjectives and verbs. Write a few new sentences with these words. This is how you will discover a personal mantra.

Creating an Art Work – Lost and Found Imagery – Activity Goal: To reflect on not only losses experienced but also some of the gains experienced throughout our lives in order to reaffirm personal strengths and resiliencies. According to Parnell (2007), drawing images, real or imagined, that embody the qualities of protectiveness, nurturance, and wisdom, can be tapped into as a stand-alone method for activating internal resources and healing potential.

The intention of this activity is to have members think of both something they have lost in their lives, as well as something they have found. This can be in-depth, or it could be fairly straightforward depending on how much each participant chooses to share at this point in the group. A piece of paper is divided in half, and members can choose to represent their lost and found items through drawings, painting, collaging with magazines, or through written words on their paper.

Discussion and Debriefing

Week 2:

Introductions- check-ins including any resounding feelings or thoughts from last week's group to share.

Creative Writing Component - I am my Safe Place Poem – Activity Goal: According to Bardot (2008), the process of searching for a poem or writing an original one, even when not specifically about death or grief, can convey important emotions and metaphors that allow for release, understanding, and transformation. Furthermore, this activity encourages individuals to find comfort and to reaffirm their personal strength in times of grief and loss through the use of imagery and words combined in a simple poetic form. This activity was modelled after Sally Atkins example of the I am Poem in Thompson and Neimeyer (2014), Grief and the Expressive Arts.

Members are first invited to take some deep breaths and tune into their body in order to be present. I then explain the activity, which involves a relaxation and guided imagery component and a writing component. Members are offered the opportunity to lie down on mats or to remain seated in chairs and to participate or not in the relaxation/guided imagery. I begin with suggestions for relaxation, such as tuning in to the various parts of the body and relaxing each part, deep breathing, and noticing and letting go of intrusive thoughts. When it seems that members of the group are relaxed, I suggest that each person imagine a place of safety and comfort. Suggestions might include entering through a door, walking along a path, or walking down steps into a place of their own creation. This could be an actual place that they can remember or a place they create in the moment. I encourage each participant to experience this place slowly and with all of their senses, noticing everything. After a time of experiencing a place of comfort in their imagination, I bring the group back into the present time and place slowly with suggestions for opening their eyes, moving fingers and toes, and stretching before slowly sitting up. We then distribute paper and pens and ask participants to write at least five sentences beginning with, "My place of comfort is ... or "My safe place is. Then, when each person has completed the sentences, ask them to change four sentences to begin with "I am ...". These sentences become the 'I am Poem.'

Creating an Art Work – Drawing your 'Safe Place' – Participants are asked to use a variety of art modalities to recreate the imagery used in the previous writing activity.

Discussion and Debriefing

Week 3

Introductions - check-ins including any resounding feelings or thoughts from last week's group to share

Creative Writing Component – Chapters of our Lives Exercise – Activity Goal: Metaphor can provide another avenue to explore self-awareness and self-expression. By describing a thought,

feeling, or mood in a non-literal way, the participant (consciously or not) makes a comparison that can be insightful and lead to further reflection (Sansom, 2007). This activity was modelled after Neimeyer's example in Grief and Expressive Arts (Thompson & Neimeyer, 2014).

This activity involves participants reflecting on their life stories, and titling them as chapters in a table of contents style page. Participants can use their own words, can use movie titles or song titles or lyrics, or use other book titles that may have importance to them.

Creating An Art Work – Grounding Drawing – Activity Goal: According to Thompson and Neimeyer (2014), the use of drawing can create a reflective distance that allows individuals who are otherwise overwhelmed to contain and transform traumatic memory, to see things differently, and to sketch new visions of themselves, others, and the world. Through symbolic representation, drawing can enhance our understandings of our personal narratives and encourage formation of new meaning.

The focus of today's work is to use various items (paints, strings, markers, sparkles, buttons, felt etc.) to create an art work representing feelings/ things that others cannot see about us below the ground level, things that ground us as the dirt/ground level, and feelings/things that we are striving for as the sky.

Discussion and Debriefing

Week 4

Introductions- check-ins including any resounding feelings or thoughts from last week's group to share.

Creative Writing Component - Furniture Exercise – Activity Goal: For the lost-for-words, metaphor can provide another avenue to explore self-awareness and self-expression. By describing a thought, feeling, or mood in a non-literal way, the participant (consciously or not) makes a comparison that can be insightful and lead to further reflection. The furniture game is adapted from Sansom (2007) to generate metaphor in poetry. It uses the non-intimidating and accessible form of a list.

This involves free-association or stream of consciousness writing components. Each participant is provided with paper and asked the following: Thinking about how you are feeling today, what would you be if you were; A piece of furniture, An animal, A flower, A time of day, A type of weather, An item of clothing, A song? Invite participants to write spontaneously and quickly as you give each prompt, allowing about 30 seconds for each. Speed is of the essence; the first thought that comes into their heads, instinctively, is the one to go with. This will generate a list of words. Next, invite them to choose something from their list and write about it for a further five minutes. The item they choose may be something that resonates strongly with them, or something that surprises them. You may suggest they explore their reasons for choosing this metaphor, asking them to describe it in more detail and reflect on its meaning and significance. Give a minute's notice to encourage participants to finish writing or reach a point at which they

can pause. The time constraint, gently enforced, will encourage them to focus and write fast, capturing as much as possible within the available minutes.

Creating a Work of Art – Molding a Metaphor – Activity Goal: The intention of this activity is to literally construct the metaphor resonating most with participants from the activity above. The metaphors people choose for themselves can help to liberate difficult thoughts and feelings. According to Thompson and Neimeyer (2014), this method has special value for those who are struggling to choose words to describe their mood, their thoughts, and the experience of grief. By offering an alternative means to describe a state of mind or an unfamiliar feeling, you provide the client with a tool to enable self-expression.

Today's activity involves exploring with clay and constructing a sculpture. Participants are asked to use calming lavender clay to construct or physically mold the metaphor that resonated deepest with them in the previous creative writing activity.

Discussion and Debriefing

Week 5

Introductions- check-ins including any resounding feelings or thoughts from last week's group to share.

Creative Writing Component and Creating an Art Work: Designing a Personal Post-Card – Activity Goal: The intention of this activity is to encourage integration of losses into our larger biography using creative narrative forms. This involves individuals reflecting on his or her life story as if it were a long journey, and actively reflecting on points in the journey which symbolize major life transitions to foster opportunity for new insight into personal strengths and resiliencies.

This activity first involves guiding the group through relaxation and to a space where they are able to reflect on their current circumstances and life stories. Group members are asked to think of their life so far as a journey and to think of different milestones in our lives and what it has been like to get from the beginning of their lives to today. The end focus of the relaxation is identifying where each person feels they are at today. Next the group is asked to design a personal post-card representative of where they are at in their life journey. Participants are asked to write out a message on the back of their postcard either to themselves, or to a person they have lost, to someone else in their lives, or to a particular place or location (personal interpretation of this activity and any creativity is encouraged). They may include where they have been, where they would like to go, what they wish they knew today. Next the group members artistically decorate the front of the post-card to represent the place of where they feel they are at in their lives. Members can use symbolic representation, real photographs, collage, paints or drawings to create the front of their card.

Final Discussion and Debriefing

Appendix E



Interview Guide

Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interview number:

Interviewee:

Photographs of the participants' art works will be accessible during the interviews.

1-In reviewing the body of work you created during this group, can you tell me about what each piece means to you or about what you've created?

- What here has the most meaning to you?

2-What has been your experience in participating in this bereavement group?

- Which of the arts exercises did you find most helpful, and the most challenging?
- In what ways?

3- Did you find this group helpful in your recent experience in coping with bereavement?

- In what ways?

4-Did you learn anything about yourself when participating in the group or creating the art?

5-Has this group assisted you to find any personal meanings in relation to your loss?

Appendix F

Feb. 18-Feb. 22

new realizations, helpful, enjoyable, experience of previous interventions, coming out of my shell, focusing on my self, hard work, paying tribute, piece of the puzzle, experience of loss, sharing, not alone, a place of comfort, a place of safety, making connections, metaphors and symbolism, reflections, staring you in the face, the act of creating, recommendations, validating, spoke to me/meaningful to me, continuing on with projects outside of group, space to talk about spirituality, being connected to loved ones, outliers, a way to express myself, art as a tool, we're meeting and they're meeting, feeling grounded, a new way to communicate, accelerated my grief / journey, feeling the presence of my loved one, outlet, specific to the exercise done, moving foreword

Feb. 23- Feb. 26

new realizations, helpful, enjoyable, hard work, a new way to communicate, a safe space, a place for reciprocal sharing, connection to self, connection to others, connection to loved ones, new realizations, new perspectives, the creative process / the act of creating, continuing on projects, a space for spirituality, accelerated my grief/ moving foreword, feeling presence of my loved one, an outlet for expression, new perspectives, experience of grief/loss, experience of previous interventions

Feb. 26 – Feb. 28

STARTING THE CONVERSATION - a safe place, a place for reciprocal sharing, connection to others

LEARNING A NEW LANGUAGE - a new way to communicate, connection to self, the creative process, outlet, new perspectives, new realizations

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION - a space for spirituality, accelerated my grief, feeling presence of loved ones, continuing on projects, connection to loved ones

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